

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Moments

Interval: 20

Flashbacks

Chapter: 1

(Flashback text- video message.) ≈ Memories of Karly... ≈

Part: 1

Memories

I get a new text message- and there is a photo attached- and there it is Maggie, spared, showing off her new butt plug in her hole... making it push in and out as she squeezes down hard on it... it is pink! And oh, so sparkly she said! And she is playing with herself- also.

I love this video. I have it...

It is on my pc now... with all the porn... and sh*t of her young sex ass!

Something they all knew after I passed... I was... um... living a fake and gay life... take that any way you want to... It is all good for me now. Cute for she was born in 2000, and she calls me old for I was born in the late- 1990's... 1998- for a fact.

(Now)

My vision is cloudy. I can barely make out the banisters. I am tripping, half falling down the stairs, finding the front door by touch. I think Hanna might be calling to me, but everything is lost to a roaring, rushing in my ears, inside my head. Sunshine, brilliant, brilliant white light-cool biting iron under my fingers, the gate-ocean smells, gasoline.

Wailing, growing louder. A punctuated shriek: beep, beep, beep.

My head clears all at once and I jump out of the middle of the street just before I am squashed by a police car, which barrels past me, horn still blaring, siren whirling, leaving me coughing up dirt and dust. The ache in my throat gets

so bad it feels like I am gagging, and when I finally let the tears come, it is a huge relief, like dropping something heavy after you have been carrying it for a long time. Once I start crying, I cannot stop, and all the way home I must keep mashing my palm into my eyes every few seconds, smearing away the tears just so

I can see where I am going. I comfort myself by thinking that in less than two months this will seem like nothing to me.

All of it will fall away and I will rise new and free, like a bird winging up into the air.

Part: 2

Lasting images

That is what Hanna does not understand, has never understood. For some of us, it is about more than the deliria. Some of us, the lucky ones, will get the chance to be reborn: newer, fresher, better. Healed, whole, and perfect again, like a misshapen slab of iron that comes out of the fire glowing, glittering, razor-sharp.

That is all I want; all I have ever wanted. That is the promise of the cure.

Lord-

Suspicious minds-

Keep our hearts fixed as you fixed the planets in their orbits and cooled the chaos of emerging-

As the gravity of your will keeps star and star from Collapsing... Keeps the ocean from turning to dust and dust from turning to water... Keeps planets from colliding... And suns from exploding-

So, Lord, keep our hearts fixed in a steady orbit and help them stay on the path.

-Psalm 21 plays over in my mind...

That night, even after I was in bed, Hana's words reply endlessly in my head. You will not end up like her. You do not have it in you. She only said it to comfort me, I know it should be reassuring-but for some reason it is not. For some reason, it makes me upset; there is a deep aching in my chest, as though something large, cold, and sharp is lodged there.

Here is another thing Hana does not understand: Thinking about the disease, worrying about it, and stressing about whether I have inherited some predisposition for it- that is all I have of my mom. The disease is what I know about her. Here is the link...

Otherwise, I have nothing.

It is not that I do not have memories of her. I do lots of them, considering how young I was when she died. I remember that when there was fresh snow, she would send me outside to pack pans with handfuls of it. Once inside we would drizzle maple syrup into the snow-filled pans, watching it harden into amber candy instantly, all loops and fragile, sugared filigree, like edible lace. I remember how much she loved to sing to us as she bounced me in the water at the beach off Eastern Prom.

I did not know how strange this was at the time. Other mothers teach their children to swim. Other mothers bounce their babies in the water and apply sunscreen to make sure their babies do not burn and do all the things that a mother is supposed to do, as outlined in the book of hush-hush- But they do not sing.

I remember that she brought me trays of buttered toast when I was sick and kissed my bruises when I fell, and I remember once when she lifted me to my feet after I fell off my bike and began to rock me in her arms, a woman gasped and said to her, 'You should be ashamed of yourself,' and I did not understand why which made me cry harder. After that, she comforted me only in private. In public, she would just frown and say,

'You are okay, Lena. Get up.'

We used to have dance parties too. My mother called them 'sock jams,' because we would roll up the carpets in the living room and put on our thickest socks and slip and slide along the wooden hallways.

Part: 3

Always on my mind

Evan Rachel joined in, though she always claimed to be too old for baby games.

My mom would draw the curtains and wedge pillows under the front and back doors and turn up the music. We laughed so hard that I always went to bed with a stomach ache.

Eventually, I understood that on our sock-jam nights she would close the curtains to prevent us from being seen by passing patrols, that she had stopped up the doors with pillows so that the neighbors would not report us for playing music and laughing too much, both potential warning signs of the deliria.

I understood that she used to tuck my father's military pin- a silver dagger he had inherited from his father, which she wore every day on a chain around her neck-beneath the collar of her shirt whenever we left the house, so no one would see it and become suspicious. I understood that all the happiest moments of my childhood were a lie.

They were wrong, unsafe, and illegal.

They were freakish. My mother was freakish, and I had inherited the freakishness from her.

For the first time, I wonder what she must have been feeling, and thinking, about the night she walked out to the cliffs and kept walking, feet pedaling the air. I wonder whether she was scared. I wonder whether she thought of me or Rachel... I wonder whether she was sorry for leaving us behind.

I started thinking about my father, too. I do not remember him at all, though I have some dim, ancient impression of two warm, rough hands and a large looming face floating above mine. That is just because my mother kept a framed portrait in her bedroom of my father and me. I was only a few months old, and he was holding me, smiling, and looking at the camera. But there is no way I am remembering for real. I was not even a year old when he died.

Cancer...!

(Flashback)

Karly- Maggie just loves wearing my class ring, which has a 1950s look gold with a silver inlay, and the band swatter that I gave up for Jenny and the girls- Just to be popular- as you no band is not cool when you do something more than they can... that is red- white- and blue... yes, it has my name on it- yet they all think it was for she has nothing- ha it for the fact I love her. Little do they all know.

Part: 4

Media

Twitter: @Olivia- 'Showing her puss- puss- nice, no? I am not that slutty!' Ha- love her!! You can see all her puss pics on Instagram also... the boys love- for reals. That is what it is all about the boys and popularity- and who hooks up with whom... grade freak that... I want to be laid- not the grade. That is how I thought then.

(Now)

Girl boy girl in- bad- rubbing- licking- kissing- sucking- his head.

The heat is horrible, and thick, clotting the walls. Kellie is rolled over on her back, arms and legs flung open on top of her comforter, breathing silently with her mouth gaping open. Hanna is fast asleep, murmuring soundlessly into her pillow. The whole room smells like a wet exhalation, skin and tongues, and warm milk.

I eased out of bed, already dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt. I did not even bother to change into my pajamas. I knew I would never be able to sleep tonight. And earlier in the evening, I had come to a decision. I was sitting at the dinner table with Carol and Uncle William, Jenny, and Grace, while everyone chewed and swallowed in silence, staring blankly at one another, feeling as though the air was weighing down on me, constricting my breath, like two fists squeezing tighter and tighter around a water balloon when I realized something.

Hanna said I did not have it in me, but she was wrong.

My heart is beating so loudly I can hear it, and I am positive that everyone else will too- that it will make my aunt sit bolt upright in her bed, ready to catch me and accuse me of trying to sneak out.

Which is, of course, exactly what I am trying to do. I did not even know a heart could beat so loudly, and it reminds me of an Edgar Allan Poe story we had to read in one of our social studies classes, about this guy who kills this other guy and then gives himself up to the police because he is convinced, he can hear the dead guy's heart beating up from beneath his floorboards. It is supposed to be a story about guilt and the dangers of civil disobedience, but when I first read it, I thought it seemed lame and melodramatic. Now I get it, though. Poe must have snuck out a lot when he was young.

I ease open the bedroom door, holding my breath, praying it does not squeak. At one point Jenny lets out a shout and my heart freezes. But then she rolls over, flinging one arm across her pillow, and I exhale slowly, realizing she is just fussing in her sleep.

The hall is dark. The room my aunt and uncle share-like is- dark too, and the only sound comes from the whispering of the trees outside and the low ticks and groans from the walls, the usual old house arthritic noises. I finally worked up the courage to slip out into the hall and slide the bedroom door shut behind me. I go so slowly that it almost feels like I am not moving at all, feeling my way by the bumps and ripples in the wallpaper over to the stairs, then sliding my hand inch by inch over the banister, walking on my very tiptoes. Even so, it seems like the house is fighting me like it is just screaming for me to be caught. Every step seems to creak, shriek, or moan.

Part: 5

Socializing

Liv on- Instagram- 'You will- like- be seeing a lot of here in the upcoming slideshow! Cute but- OMG!'

Jenny is too wide and sh*t and raunchy slutty to show those... you- have seen her photos by now... what did you think... cute...??? Or am I the cutest?

Snap-chat me for 1,000 tokens, and you have it for life!

All single floorboard quivers and shudders under my feet, and I start mentally bargaining with the house: If I make it to the front door without waking up mom, would- I swear to God I will never slam another door. I will never call you 'an old piece of turd' again, not even in my head, and I will never curse the basement when it floods, and I will never, ever, ever kick the bedroom wall when I am annoyed at Jenny.

The house hears me, because, miraculously, I do make it to the front door. I pause for a second longer, listening to the sounds of footsteps upstairs, whispered voices, anything- but other than my heart, which is still going strong and loud, it is silent.

Even the house seems to hesitate and take a breath, because the front door swings open with barely a whisper, and in the last second before I slip out into the night the rooms behind me are as dark and still as a grave.

Outside, I hesitate on the front stoop.

The fireworks stopped an hour ago- I heard the last stuttering explosions, like distant gunfire, just as I was getting ready for bed and now the streets are strangely silent and empty. It is a little after eleven o'clock. Some courses must be lingering at the Eastern Prom.

Part: 6

Nocturnal

Everyone else is home by now. Not a single light is burning on the street. All the streetlamps were disabled years ago, except in the richest parts of Pittsburgh, and they look to me like blinded eyes. Thank God, the moon is so bright.

I strain to detect the sounds of passing patrols or groups of regulators - I almost hope I do, because then I will have to go back inside, to my bed, to safety, and already the panic is starting to drill through me again. But everything is perfectly still and quiet like it is frozen. Everything rational, right, and good is screaming for me to turn around and go upstairs, but some stubborn inner center keeps me moving forward.

I go down the walk and unchain my bike from the gate.

My bike rattles a little bit, particularly when I first start pedaling, so I walk it some ways down the street. The wheels tick reassuringly over the pavement.

I have never been out this late on my own in my life. I have never broken curfew. But alongside the fear, which is always there, of course, that constant crushing weight is a small, flickering feeling of excitement that works its way up and underneath the fear, pushing it back some. Like, it is okay, I am all right, I can do this. I am just a girl-an in-between girl, five-two, nothing special- but I can do this, and all the curfews and the patrols in the world are not stopping me.

It is amazing how much comfort this thought gives me. It is amazing how it breaks up the fear, as a tiny candle lit in the middle of the night, lighting up the shapes of things, and burning away the dark.

When I reach the end of my street I hop up on my bike, feeling the gears shudder into place. The breeze feels good as I start pedaling, careful not to go too quickly, staying alert in case there are regulators nearby. Fortunately, Stroud water and Roaring Brooke Farms are in the exact opposite direction from the

Fourth of July celebrations at Eastern Prom.

Once- I get to the broad swath of farmland that surrounds Pittsburgh like a belt, I should be okay. The farms and slaughterhouses rarely get patrolled.

But first I must make it through the West End, where rich people like Hanna live, through the old town, and over the Fore River at Bridge Street.

Thankfully, each street I turn down is empty.

Stroud-water is a good thirty minutes away, even if I am biking quickly. As I get off- the peninsula- moving away from the buildings and businesses of downtown Pittsburgh and onto the more suburban mainland-the houses get smaller and farther apart, set back on weedy, patchy yards. This is not rural Pittsburgh yet, but there are signs of the countryside creeping in: plants poking up through half-rotted porches, an owl hooting mournfully in the dark, a black scythe of bats cutting suddenly across the sky. All these houses have cars in front of them just like the richer houses in, Northern End but these have been salvaged from the junkyards.

They are mounted on cinder blocks and covered in rust. I pass one that has a tree growing straight through its sunroof, like the car has just dropped out of the sky and been impaled there, and another one, hood open, missing its engine. As I go past, a cat startles up out of its black cavity, meowing, and blinking at me.

After I cross the Fore River the houses fall away altogether, and it is just field after field and farm after farm, with names like Meadow Lane and Sheep Bay and oak's part by the river, which make them sound all homey and nice: places where someone might be baking muffins and skimming fresh cream for butter.

Across the fields I see the low, dark silhouettes of barns and silos, some of them brand-new, some of them barely standing, clinging to the earth like teeth Digging into something. The air smells slightly sweet, like growing things and manure.

But... but... but... but... um...

Most of the farms are owned by big corporations, packed with livestock, and often staffed by orphans.

I have always liked it out here, but it is freaky in the dark, open, and empty, and I cannot help but think that if I did come across a patrol there would be no place to hide, no alley to turn down.

Roaring Brooke's Farms is right next to the southwestern border of the town. It has been abandoned for years since half the main building and both grain silos were destroyed in a fire.

About five minutes before I get there, I think I can make out a rhythm drumming imperceptibly under the throaty song of the crickets, but for a while, I am not sure if I am just imagining it or only hearing my heart, which has started pounding again.

Farther on, though, and I am sure. Even before I reach the little dirt road that leads down to the barn—or at least, the portion of the barn that is still standing—strains of music spring up, crystallizing in the night air like rain turning suddenly to snow, drifting to earth.

Now I am scared again. All I can think of is wrong, wrong, wrong, a word that drums in my head. Mom would kill me if she knew what I was doing.

~*~

Kill- me or have me thrown into the Burial chamber or taken to the labs for an early procedure, willow, and oak marks—style.

I hop off my bike when I see the turnoff to Roaring Brooke, and the big metal sign stuck in the ground that reads PROPERTY OF Pittsburgh, NO TRESPASSING. I wheel my bike some little ways, into the woods at the side of the road. The actual farmhouse and the old barn are still five or six hundred feet down the road, but I do not want to take my bike any farther. I do not lock it up, though. I do not even want to think about what would happen if there was a raid, but if there is, I am not going to want to be fumbling with a lock in the half-dark. I will need speed.

I step around the NO TRESPASSING sign.

I am getting to be quite the expert at ignoring them, I realize, remembering how Hana and I hopped the gate at the labs. It is the first time I have thought about that afternoon in a while, and right then a vision of Alex rises in front of me, a memory of seeing him on the observation deck, head tilted back and laughing.

I must focus on the land around me, the brightness of the moon, and the wildflowers on the road. It helps me beat back the feeling that I am going to be sick at any second. I do not know what compelled me out of the house, why I felt like I had to prove Hana wrong about something, and I am trying to ignore

the idea-way more disturbing than anything else-that my argument with Hana was just an excuse.

Deep down, I was simply curious.

Someone is singing: a beautiful voice as thick and heavy as warm honey, spilling up and down a scale so quickly I feel dizzy just listening.

That music was metallic and awful, fuzzy through the speakers. The music that is playing underneath the voice is strange, clashing, and wild-but nothing like the wailing and scratching that I heard Hana playing on her computer earlier today, though I recognize certain similarities, certain patterns of melody and rhythm.

This music ebbs and flows, irregular, and sad. It reminds me, weirdly, of watching the ocean during a bad storm, the lashing, crashing waves, and the spray of sea foam against the docks; the way it takes your breath away, the power, and the hugeness of it. I am not feeling curious now. I am feeling scared. And very, very stupid.

The farmhouse and the old barn are positioned in a dip of land between two hills, and a mini valley, like the constructions, is sitting right in the middle of somebody's pursed lips. Because of the way the land slopes I cannot see the farmhouse yet, but as I get closer to the top of the hill the music gets clearer and louder. It is like nothing I have ever heard before. It is not like- the authorized music you can download off LAM, prim, harmonious, and structured, the kind of music that gets played in the bandshell in Deering Oaks Park during official summer concerts.

That is exactly what happens as I listen to the music, as I come up over the final crest of a hill, and the half-ruined barn and collapsing farmhouse fan out in front of me, just as the music swells, a wave about to break: The breath leaves my body all at once, and I am struck dumb by the beauty of it. For a second it seems to me like I am looking down at the ocean-a sea of people, writing and dancing in the light spilling down from the barn-like shadows twisting up around a flame.

The barn is completely gutted: split open and blackened by the fire, exposed to the elements. Only half of it is left standing fragments of three walls, a portion of the roof, and part of an elevated platform that must once have been used to store hay. That is where the band is playing. Thin, stalky trees have

begun pushing up in the fields. Older trees seared completely white from the fire and bald branches and leaves, point-like ghostly fingers to the sky.

Fifty feet beyond the barn, I see the low fringe of blackness where the unregulated land begins. The Wilds. I cannot make out the border fence from this distance, but I imagine I can feel it and can sense the electricity buzzing through the air. I have only been close to the border fence a few times. Once with my mother years ago, when she made me listen to the zipping of the electricity-a current so strong the air seems to hum with it; you can get a shock just from standing four feet away-and promise never, ever, ever to touch it.

She told me that when the cure was first made mandatory, some people tried to escape over the border. They never put more than a hand on the fence before being fried like bacon - I remember that is exactly what she said, like bacon.

Since then, I have run alongside it with Hanna a few times, always careful to stay a good ten feet away.

In the barn, someone has set up speakers and amps and even two enormous, industrial-sized lamps, which make everyone close to the stage look starkly white and hyper-real, and everyone else dark and indistinct, blurry.

A song ends and the crowd roars together with an ocean sound. I think they must be mooching power from a grid on one of the other farms. I think, this is stupid, I will never find Hana, there are too many people and then a new song starts, this one just as wild and beautiful, and it is like the music reaches across all that black space and pulls at something at the very heart and root of me, plucking me like a string. I head down the hill toward the barn. The weird thing is I do not choose to do it.

My feet just go on their own, as though they have happened on some invisible track and it is all just slides, photographs, prints.

For a moment, I forgot that I was supposed to be looking for Hana. I feel as though I am in a dream, where strange things are happening, but they do not feel strange. Everything is cloudy- everything is wrapped in a fog, and I am filled from head to toe with the single, burning desire to get closer to the music, to hear the music better, for the music to go on and on and on.

‘Kellie! Oh my God, Kell!’ Hearing my name snaps me out of my daze, and I am suddenly aware that I am standing in a huge crush of people.

No. Not just people. Boys. And girls.

Uncured, all of them, without a hint of a blemish on their necks-at least the ones standing close enough for me to scope out. Children talking. Children laughing. Children share sips from the same cup. Suddenly,

I think I might faint.

Hanna is barreling toward me, elbowing people out of the way, and before I can even open my mouth, she is jumping on top of me as she did at graduation, squeezing me in a hug. I was so startled I stumbled backward, nearly falling over.

‘You’re here.’

She pulls away and stares at me, keeping her hands on my shoulders. ‘You’re here.’

Another song ends, and the lead singer -a tiny girl with long black hair- calls out something about a break. As my brain slowly reboots, I have the dumbest thought: She is even shorter than I am, and she is singing in front of five hundred people.

Then I think, five hundred people, five hundred people, what am I doing here with five hundred people?

‘I can’t stay,’ I say quickly. The moment the words are out of my mouth I feel relieved. Whatever I came here to prove has been proven; now I can go. I need to get out of this crowd, the babble of voices, a shifting wall of chests, and shoulders all around me. I was too wrapped up in the music earlier to look around, but now I have the sensation of colors and perfumes and hands twisting and turning around us.

‘Lena,’ she says, ‘this is my friend Drew.’ She looks guilty for just a second, but then the smile is back on her face, as wide as ever like we are standing in the middle of St. Paul’s talking about a bio quiz.

Hana opens her mouth- to object-but at that second, we are interrupted. A boy with dirty blond hair falling into his eyes pushes his way over to us, carrying two big plastic cups. The dirty-blond-hair boy passes a cup to Hana. She takes it, thanks him, and then turns back to me.

~*~

I open my mouth, but no words come out, which is a good thing, considering that there is a giant fire alarm going off in my head. It may sound stupid and naive, but not once when I was heading to the farms did, I even consider that the party would be coed. It did not even occur to me.

Breaking curfew is one thing; listening to unapproved music is even worse. But breaking segregation laws is one of the worst offenses there is. Thus, Willow Mark's early procedure and the graffiti scrawled on her house; thus, the fact that Chelsea Brown was kicked out of school after being found breaking curfew with a boy from Spencer, her parents were mysteriously fired, and her whole family was forced to vacate their house. And- at least in Chelsea's case- there was not even any proof. Just a rumor going around.

Drew gives me a half-wave. 'Hey, Liv...'

My mouth opens and closes... Still no sound... For a second, we stand there in awkward silence. Then he extends a cup to me, a sudden, jerky gesture.

'Whiskey...?'

'Whiskey...?' I squeak back... I have only had alcohol a few times... At Christmas, when mom pours me a quarter glass of wine, and once at Hana's house when we stole some blackberry liqueur from her parent's liquor cabinet and drank until the ceiling started spinning overhead.

Hanna was laughing and giggling, but I did not like it, did not like the sweet sick taste in my mouth, or the way my thoughts seemed to break apart like a mist in the sun. Out of control- that is what it was, that is what I hated.

Drew shrugs. 'It is all they had.'

'Vodka always goes first at these things.' At this thing-as in, these things happen, as in, more than once.

'No.' I try to shove the cup back at him. 'Take it.'

He waves me away, obviously misunderstanding. 'It is cool. I will just get another.'

Drew smiles quickly at Hanna before disappearing into the crowd. I like his smile, the way it rises crookedly toward his left ear- but as I realize I am thinking about liking his smile, I feel the panic winging its way through me, beating through my blood, a lifetime of whispers and accusations.

Control. It is all about control.

'I have to go,' I managed to say to Hanna. Progress.

'Go?' She wrinkled her forehead up.

'You walk out here-'

'I biked.'

I pretend to shiver so she does not feel bad, wondering why it feels so awkward to talk to her. This is my best friend, the girl I have known since second grade, the girl who used to split her cookies with me at lunch, and once put her fist in Jillian Dawson's face after Jillian said my family was diseased.

'I'm tired,' I say. 'And I shouldn't be here.' I want to say, you should not be here either, but I will stop myself.

'Whatever, you bike out here and then you're just going to go?'

Hanna reaches for my hand, but I cross my arms quickly to avoid her. She looks momentarily hurt.

Part: 7

Gracelessness

'Did you hear the band? They are amazing, aren't they?' Hanna's being too nice, un-Hanna, and I feel a deep, sharp pain in my ribs. She is trying to be polite. She is acting like we are strangers. She feels the awkwardness too.

'I- I wasn't listening.' For some reason, I do not want Hanna to know that yes, I heard, and yes, I thought they were amazing, better than amazing.

It is too private- embarrassing even, something to be ashamed of, and even though I came to Roaring Brooke Farms, and broke curfew and everything, just to see her and apologize, the feeling- I had earlier today returns to me: I do not know Hanna anymore, and she does not know me.

I am used to a feeling of double-ness, of thinking one thing and having to do another, a constant tug-of-war. But somehow Hanna has fallen cleanly away into the double half, the other world, the world of unmentionable thoughts and things and people.

Is it possible that all this time I have been living my life, studying for tests, taking long runs with Hana-and this other world has just existed, running alongside and underneath mine, alive, ready to sneak out of the shadows and the alleyways as soon as the sun goes down? Illegal parties, unapproved music,

people touching one another with no fear of disease, with no fear for themselves.

A world without fear. Impossible.

And even though I am standing in the middle of the biggest crowd I have ever seen in my life; I suddenly feel very alone.

‘Stay,’ Hana says quietly. Even though it is a command, there is a hesitation in her voice, like she is asking a question.

‘You can catch the second set.’

I shake my head. I wish I had not come.

I wish I had not seen this. I wish I did not know what I know now, could wake up tomorrow and ride over to Hanna’s house could lie out at Eastern Prom with her and complain about how boring summers are like we always do.

I could believe that nothing had changed.

‘I’m going to go,’ I say, wishing my voice did not come out shaky. ‘It is all right, though. You can stay.’

The second I say it; I realize she never offered to come back with me. She is looking at me with the weirdest mixture of regret and pity.

‘I can come back with you if you want,’ she says, but I can tell she is only offering now to make me feel better. ‘No, no. I will be fine.’ My cheeks are burning, and I take a step back, desperate to get out of there. I bump into someone-a boy who turns and smiles at me. I stepped quickly away from him.

‘Lena, wait.’ Hana goes to grab me again. Even though she already has a drink, I shove my cup in her free hand, so she must pause, momentarily frowning as she tries to juggle both drinks into the crook of an elbow, and in that second, I dance backward out of her reach.

‘I will be fine, I promise. I will talk to you tomorrow.’ Then I am slipping through a narrow space between two people- that is the only benefit of being five-two, you have a good vantage point on all the in-between spaces-and before I know it, Hana has dropped behind me, swallowed up by the crowd. I weave a path away from the barn, keeping my eyes down, hoping my cheeks cool off fast.

Images swirl by, a blur, making me feel like I am dreaming again. Boy. Girl.

Boy/Girl. Laughing, shoving each other, touching each other's hair. I've never, not once in my whole life, felt so different and out of place. There is a high, mechanized shriek, and then the band starts playing again, but this time the music does nothing for me. I do not even pause. I just keep walking, heading for the hill, imagining the cool silence of the starlit fields, the familiar dark streets of Pittsburgh, the regular rhythm of the patrols, marching quietly coordinated, the feedback from the regulators' walkie-talkies- regular, normal, familiar, mine.

Finally, the crowd starts thinning. It was hot, pressed up against so many people, and the breeze stung my skin, and cooled my cheeks. I started to calm down a little, and at the edge of the crowd, I allowed myself to look back at the stage. The barn, open to the sky and the night and glowing white with light, reminds me of a palm cupping a small bit of fire.

'Kellie!'

It is strange how I instantly recognize the voice even though I have heard it only once before, for ten minutes, fifteen tops -it is the laughter that runs underneath it, like someone leaning in to let you in on a good secret in the middle of a boring class.

My vision does its camera- zooming in focus again, and all I see is Ray, shouldering his way out of the crowd toward me.

'Liv! Wait!'

A brief flash of terror zips through me -for a wild second, I think he must be here as part of a patrol, as a raiding group or something- but then I see he is dressed normally, in jeans and his scuffed-up sneakers with the ink-blue laces and a faded T-shirt. Everything freezes...

The blood stops flowing in my veins, my breath stops coming also. For a second even the music falls away and all I hear is something steady and quiet and pretty, like the distant beat of a drum, and I am hearing my heart, except I know that is impossible because my heart has stopped too.

'What are you doing here?' I stammer out as he catches up with me.

He grins at me- 'Nice to see you too.'

He has left a few feet of distance between us, and I am glad. In the half-light, I cannot make out the color of his eyes and I do not need to be distracted right now, do not need to feel the way I did at the labs when he leaned in to whisper to me- the total awareness of the bare inch that separated his mouth from my ear, terror, guilt, and excitement all at once.

‘I’m serious.’ I do my best to scowl at him.

‘But you can’t...’ I am struggling to find words, not sure how to say what I want to say. ‘But then again this is...’

‘Illegal...?’ He shrugs... His smile falters, though it does not disappear entirely. He blows air out of his lips. ‘I came to hear the music,’ he says. ‘Like everybody else.’

One strand of hair curls down over his left eye, and when he turns to scan the party, it catches the light from the stage and winks that crazy golden-brown color. ‘It’s okay,’ he says, quieter so that I must lean forward to hear him over the music.

‘Nobody’s hurting anybody.’

You do not know what I start to say, but the way his words are just edged with sadness stops me.

Part: 8

Snaps

Olivia tweets- Tell me how pretty it is, #p*ssy-pic.

Kiss me here Kellie...

He is only regretful of the things he lost after the cure. Music does not move people the same way, for example, and while he should have been cured of feelings of regret, too, the procedure works differently for everybody, and it is not always perfect. Ray runs a hand through his hair, and I make out the small, dark, three-pronged scar behind his left ear, perfectly symmetrical.

That is why my aunt and uncle sometimes still dream. That is why my cousin Marcella used to find herself crying hysterically, with no warning or apparent cause.

‘So, what about you?’ He turns back to me, and the smile is on again, and the teasing, winking quality of his voice.

‘What’s your excuse?’

‘I didn’t want to come,’ I said quickly.

‘I had to-’ I break off, realizing I am not sure why I had to come. ‘I had to give something to someone,’ I say finally.

He raises his eyebrows, clearly unimpressed. I rush on, ‘To Hanna. My friend. You met her the other day.’

‘I remember,’ he says.

‘For standing me up.’ One corner of his mouth hitches higher, and again I have the feeling that he is sharing some delicious secret with me, that he is trying to tell me something. ‘You were a no-show at Back and Gold Cove that day.’

I have never seen anyone maintain a smile for so long. It is like his face is naturally molded that way. ‘You haven’t said you’re sorry yet.’

‘For what?’ The crowd has continued to press closer to the stage, so Ray and I are no longer surrounded by people.

Occasionally, someone walks by, swinging a bottle of something or singing along, slightly off-key, but we are alone.

I felt a burst of triumph-he was waiting for me at Back and Gold Cove! He did want me to meet him! At the same time, anxiety blooms inside of me. He wants something from me. I am not sure what it is, but I can sense it, and it makes me afraid.

‘So?’ He folds his arms and rocks back on his heels, still smiling. ‘Are you going to apologize, or what?’

His easiness and self-assurance aggravate me; just like they did at the labs. It is so unfair, so different from how I feel like I am about to have a heart attack or melt into a puddle.

‘I don’t apologize to liars,’ I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds.

He winces. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Come on.’ I roll my eyes, feeling increasingly confident by the second. ‘You lied about seeing me at evaluations. You lied about recognizing me.’ I am

ticking his lies off on my fingers. 'You lied about even being inside the labs on Evaluation Day.'

'Okay, okay.'

To keep the process 'pure' or something, I do not know. But I needed a cup of coffee, and there is this machine on the second floor of the C complex that has the good kind, with real milk and everything, so I used my card to get in. He held up both hands.

'I am sorry, okay? Look, I am the one who should apologize.' He stares at me for a second and then sighs. 'I told you; security is not allowed in the labs during evaluations. That is, it.'

End of story.

And afterward, I had to lie about it. I could lose my job. And I only work at the stupid labs to subsidize my school -' He trails off. For once he does not look confident. He looks worried like he is scared I might tell on him.

'So why were you on the observation deck?' I press on... 'Why are you watching me?'

'I didn't even make it to the second floor,' he says. He is staring at me closely, as though judging my reaction.

'I came inside, and-and- I just heard this crazy noise. That rushing, roaring sound.'

And something else, too. Screaming or something.'

I close my eyes briefly, recalling the feeling of the burning white lights, my impression of hearing the ocean pounding outside the labs, of hearing my mother scream across the distance of a decade. When I open them again, Ray is still watching me.

'Anyway, I had no idea what was going on. I thought- I do not know, it is stupid, but I thought the labs were under attack or something. And then as I am standing there, suddenly there is, like, a hundred cows charging me.' He shrugs. 'There was a staircase to my left. I freaked out and booked it. Figured cows do not climb stairs.' A smile appears again, this time fleeting, tentative. 'I ended up on the observation deck.'

A perfectly normal, reasonable explanation. I feel relieved, and less frightened of him now. At the same time, something is working under my chest, a dull feeling, a disappointment.

And some stubbornness, a part of me that still doubts him. I remember the way he looked on the observation deck, head tilted back, laughing; the way he winked at me. The way he looked amused, confident, happy. Unaframed. A world without fear-

'So-o, you don't know anything about how-how it happened?' I cannot believe I am being so bold. I ball up my fists and squeeze, hoping he does not notice the sudden strangled sound of my voice.

'The mix-up in the deliveries, you mean?' He says it smoothly, without a pause or a break in his voice, and the last of my doubts vanish. Just like any cure, he does not question the official story. 'I was not in charge of signing deliveries that day. The guy who was- Sal-was fired. You are supposed to check the cargo. He skipped that step.' He cocks his head to one side and spreads his hands. 'Satisfied now?'

'Satisfied,' I say. But the pressure in my chest is still there. Even though earlier I was desperate to be out of the house, now I just wish I could blink and be home, sitting up in bed, pushing the covers off my legs, realizing that everything-the party, seeing Ray- was a dream.

'So -?' He tilts his head back toward the barn. The band is playing something loud and fast-paced. I do not know why the music appealed to me before. It just seems like noise now- rushing noise. 'Think we can get closer without getting trampled?'

I ignore the fact that he has just said 'we,' a word that for some reason sounds amazingly appealing when pronounced with his lilting, laughing accent. 'Actually, I was just heading home.' I realize I am angry at him without knowing why for not being what I thought he was, I guess, even though I should be grateful that he is normal, cured, and safe.

'Heading home?' he repeats disbelievingly. 'You can't go home.' I have always been careful not to let myself give in to feelings of anger or irritation. I cannot afford to stay at Carol's house. I owe her too much and besides, after the few tantrums I threw as a child, I hated the way she looked at me sideways for days, as though analyzing me, measuring me. I knew she was thinking, just like her mother. But now I give in and let the anger surge. I am sick of people acting

like this world, this other world, is the normal one, while I am the freak. It is not fair: like all the rules have suddenly been changed and somebody forgot to tell me.

‘I can, and I am.’ I turn around and start heading up the hill, figuring he will leave me alone. To my surprise, he does not.

‘Wait!’ He comes bounding up the hill after me.

‘What are you doing?’ I whirl around to face him again, surprised by how confident I sound, considering that my heart is rushing, and tumbling.

This is the secret to talking to boys-you just must be angry all the time.

‘What do you mean?’ We are both slightly out of breath from hoofing it up the hill, but he still manages to smile. ‘I just want to talk to you.’

‘You’re following me.’ I cross my arms, which helps me feel as though I am closing off the space between us. ‘You’re following me again.’ There it is... He starts backward, and I get a momentary, sick twinge of pleasure, that I have surprised him. ‘Again...?’ He repeats... I am glad that for once, I am not the one stuttering, or struggling to find words.

The words fly out: ‘I think it’s a little bit strange that I go my whole life without seeing you, and then suddenly I start seeing you everywhere.’ I had not planned to say this-it had not struck me as strange-but the second the words are out of my mouth I realize they are true.

He is going to be angry, but to my surprise he tips his head back and laughs, long and loud, moonlight turning the curve of his cheeks and chin and nose silver. I am so surprised by his reaction that I just stand there, staring at him. Finally, he looks at me. Even though I still cannot make out his eyes-the moon draws everything starkly, highlighting it in bright, crystalline silver or leaving it in blackness- I have the impression of heat, and light, the same impression I had that day at the labs.

‘Maybe you just haven’t been paying attention,’ he says quietly, rocking forward slightly on his heels.

I take an unconscious, half-shuffling step backward. I find myself frightened by his closeness; by the fact that even though our bodies are separated by several inches I feel as though we are touching.

‘What-what do you mean?’

‘I mean that you’re wrong.’ He pauses, watching me, and I struggle to keep my face composed, even though I can feel my left eye straining and fluttering. Hopefully, in the darkness, he cannot tell. ‘We’ve seen each other plenty.’

Part: 9

Immature

‘I would remember if we’d met before.’

‘I didn’t say that we’d met.’ He does not try to close the new distance between us, and I am grateful, at least, for that. He chews on the corner of a lip—a gesture that makes him look younger.

‘Let me ask you a question,’ he goes on.

‘How come you do not run past the Governor anymore?’

Without meaning to, I gasp a little.

‘How do you know about the Governor?’

‘I take classes at IUP,’ he says.

I remember the University of Pittsburgh—I remember now, the afternoon we walked up to see the ocean from the back of the lab complex, hearing bits of his conversation floating back to me on the wind. He did say he was a student. ‘I worked at the Grind last semester, in Monument Square. I used to see you all the time.’ My mouth opens and shuts. No words come out; my brain goes on lockdown whenever I need it the most.

Of course, I know the Grind; Hana and I used to run past it two or three times a week, watching the college students float in and out like drifting snowflakes, blowing steam from the top of their cups. The Grind looks out onto a small square, all cobblestone, called Monument Square: It marks the halfway point of one of the six-mile routes I used to do all the time.

In its center is a statue of a man, half-eroded from snow and weather, and scrawled over with a few looping curls of graffiti. He is striding forward, one hand holding his hat on his head so that it looks like he is walking through a horrible storm or a headwind. His other fist is extended in front of him. It is

obvious that he was, in the distant past, holding something-a torch- but at some point, that portion of the statue was broken or stolen. So now the Governor strides forward with an empty fist, a circular hole cut in his hand, a perfect hiding place for notes and secret stuff.

Hanna and I used to check his fist sometimes, to see if there was anything good inside. Nonetheless, there were not just a few pieces of wadded-up chewing gum and some coins.

Part: 10

Infidelities

(Past- chatting)

I never got this by liv like to cummie- with little- no make on- or not fixed up not like pride- and sh*t- for she said, 'Like kar- if a boy wants to see me cummie- he- we must love me like this... I am doing this at home in my room- like the way I want too. They will look regardless.' Not me at all in my thinking- but okay.

#- Hashtag: (Girlie talk'n)

(Now)

I do not know when Hana and I started calling him the Governor, or why. The wind and rain rubbed the plaque at the base of the statue indecipherable. No one else calls him that. Everyone else just says, 'The statue at Monument Square.' Ray must have overheard us talking about the Governor one day.

Ray is still looking at me, waiting, and I realize, I never answered his question. 'I have to switch my routes up,' I say, I have not run past the Governor since March or April. 'It gets boring.' And then, because I cannot help it,

I squeak out, 'You remember me?'

He laughs... 'You were hard to miss. You used to run around the statue and do this jumping, whooping thing.' Heat creeps up my neck and cheeks. I must be going a deep red again, and I thank God for the fact that we have moved away from the stage lights. I completely forgot; I used to jump up and try to high-five the Governor as Hanna and I and she ran past, a way of psyching myself up for the run back to school.

Sometimes we would even scream out, 'Halena!' We must have looked completely crazy.

'I don't-' I lick my lips, fumbling for an explanation that will not sound ridiculous. 'When you run you sometimes do weird things. Because of the endorphins. It is like a drug, you know. Messes with your brain.'

'I liked it,' he says. 'You looked -' He trails off for a moment. His face contracts slightly, a tiny shift I can barely make out in the dark, but in that second, he looks so still and sad it almost takes my breath away, like he is a statue or a different person. I am afraid he will not finish his sentence, but then he says, 'You looked happy.'

For a second, we just stood there in silence. Then, suddenly, Ray is back, easy, and smiling again. 'I left a note for you one time. In the Governor's fist, you know?'

I left a note for you once. It is impossible, too crazy to think about, and I hear myself repeating, 'You left a note for me?'

'I am sure it said something stupid. Just hi, and a smiley face, and my name. But then you stopped coming.' He shrugs. 'It is still there. The note, I mean. Just a bit of paper pulp by now.'

He left me a note. He left me a note. For me. The idea-the fact of it, the fact that he even noticed and thought about me for more than one second is huge and overwhelming, makes my legs go tingly and my hands feel numb.

And then I am frightened. This is how it starts. Even if he is cured, even if he is safe-the fact is, I am not safe, and this is how it starts. Phase One: preoccupation; difficulty focusing; dry mouth; perspiration, sweaty palms; dizziness, and disorientation. I feel a rushing blend of sickness and relief, a feeling like finding out that everyone knows your worst secret and has known all along. And the thing, the disease, is inside of me, ready at any moment to start working on my insides, to start poisoning me.

All this time mom was right, my teachers were right, and my cousins were right. I am just like my mother.

'I have to go.' I start up the hill again, nearly sprinting now, but again he comes after me.

‘Hey. Not so fast.’ At the top of the hill, he reaches out and puts a hand on my wrist to stop me. His touch burns, and I jerk away quickly. ‘Lena. Hold on a second.’

Even though I know I should not, I stop.

It is the way he says my name: like music.

‘You do not have to be worried, okay? You do not have to be scared.’ His voice is twinkling again. ‘I’m not flirting with you.’ My mind is spinning blindly in a panic, and I realize I do not even know what flirting is. I just know about it from textbooks; I just know that it is bad. Is it possible to flirt without knowing you are flirting? Is he flirting? My left eye goes full flutter.

‘Relax,’ he says, holding up both hands, a gesture like, do not be mad at me. ‘I was kidding.’ He turns just slightly to the left, watching me the whole time.

Part: 11

Like her stupid

Liv’s- nip is hanging out like her stupid!

Awkwardness sweeps through me.

Flirting. A dirty word. He thinks he is flirting. ‘I’m not- I don’t think you were- I would never think that you-’ The words collide in my mouth, and now I know there is no amount of darkness that can cover the rush of red to my face.

He cocks his head to the side. ‘Are you flirting with me, then?’

‘What? No,’ I splutter.

The moon lights up his three-pronged scar vividly: a perfect white triangle, a scar that makes you think of order and regularity. ‘I am safe, remember? I cannot hurt you.’

He says it quietly, evenly, and I believe him. As well yet my heart will not stop its frantic winging in my chest, spinning higher and higher, until I am sure it is going to carry me off. I feel the way I do whenever I get to the top of the Hill and can see back down Legislature Street, with the whole of Pitt. lying behind me, the streets a shimmer of greens and grays-from a distance, both beautiful and unfamiliar-just before I spread my arms and let go, trip, and skip and run

down the hill, wind whipping in my face, not even trying to move, just letting gravity pull me.

Breathless; excited; waiting for the drop.

I suddenly realized how quiet it is.

The band stopped playing, and the crowd went silent too. The only sound is the wind shushing over the grass. From where we are, fifty feet past the crest of the hill, the barn, and the party are invisible. I have a brief fantasy that we are the only two people out in the darkness, that we are the only two people awake and alive in the city, in the world.

The soft strands of music begin to weave themselves up in the air, gentle, sighing, so quiet at first, I confuse the sounds for the wind. This music is different from the music that was playing earlier soft, and fragile, as though each note is spun glass, or silken thread, looping up and back into the night air.

Once again, I am struck by how beautiful it is, as nothing- I have ever heard, and out of nowhere, I am overwhelmed by the dual desire to laugh and cry.

‘This song is my favorite.’ A cloud skitters across the moon, and shadows dance over Ray’s face. He is still staring at me, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. ‘Have you ever danced?’ ‘No,’ I say, a little too forcefully.

He laughs softly. ‘It is okay. I will not tell you.’

Images of my mother: the softness of her hands as she spun me down the long-polished wood floors of our house, as though we were ice-skaters; the fluted quality of her voice as she sang along to the songs piping from the speakers, laughing. ‘My mother used to dance,’ I say. The words slip out, and I regret them instantly.

But then again, Ray does not question me or laugh.

He keeps watching me progressively. For a moment he seems on the edge of saying anything at all. But then he just holds out his hand to me across space, across the dark.

‘Would you like to?’ He says... His voice is hardly audible above the wind so low it is barely a whisper.

‘Would I like to do what?’

Part: 12

Interrogations

Impersonal words from Liv-

MFC- Silly boy question: 'So-o Liv- when did you become a smart ass...?'

She said back- 'When I became smart and found out I had an ass!'

Kisses... (Do you want to suck on my candy cane?)

My heart is roaring, rushing in my ears, and though there are still several inches between his hand and mine, there is a zipping, humming energy that connects us, and from the heat flooding my body you would think we were pressed together, palm to palm, face to face.

'Dance,' he says, at the same time closing those last few inches, finding my hand, and pulling me closer, and at that second the song hits a high note and I confuse the two impressions, of his hand and the soaring, the lifting of the music.

We dance...

Most things, even the greatest movements on earth, have their beginnings in something small. An earthquake that shatters a city might begin with a tremor, a tremble, or a breath.

Music begins with a vibration. The flood that rushed into Pitt twenty years ago after two months of straight rain, that hurtled up beyond the labs and damaged more than a thousand houses, swept up tires and trash bags and old, smelly shoes and floated them through the streets like prizes, that left a thin film of green mold behind, a stench of rotting and decay that did not go away for months, began with a trickle of water, no wider than a finger, lapping up onto the docks. And God created the whole universe from an atom no bigger than thought.

Grace's life fell apart because of a single word: sympathizer. My world exploded because of a different word: suicide.

Correction: That was the first time my world exploded.

The second time my world exploded, it was also because of a word. A word that worked its way out of my throat and danced into and out of my lips before I could think about it or stop it.

The question was: Will you meet me tomorrow?

And the word was: Yes.

Part: 13

Ecstasy

Karly- periods of euphoria; hysterical laughter and heightened energy periods of despair; lethargy changes in appetite; rapid weight loss or weight gain fixation; loss of other interests compromised reasoning skills; distortion of reality disruption of sleep patterns; insomnia or constant fatigue obsessive thoughts and actions paranoia; insecurity difficulty breathing pain in the chest, throat, or stomach difficulty swallowing; refusal to eat complete breakdown of rational faculties; erratic behavior; violent thoughts and fantasies; hallucinations and delusions emotional or physical paralysis (partial or total)

Death-

If you fear that you or someone you know may have contracted deliria, please call the emergency line toll-free at 1-800PRECLUDE to discuss immediate intake and treatment.

I would never have understood how Hana could lie so often and so easily. But just like anything else, lying becomes easier the more you do it. Therefore, when I get home from work the next day, Carol asks me whether I do not mind having hot dogs for the fourth straight night in a row... (The result of a shipment surplus at the Save a lot; we once went a whole two weeks having baked beans every day.)

I say that Kellie from St. Paul has invited me, and some other girls over for dinner. I do not even have to think about it. The lie just comes. Besides, I still feel sweat prickling up under my palms, my voice stays calm, and I am sure my face keeps its normal color because Carol just gives me one of her flitting smiles and says that that sounds nice. At six-thirty I got on my bike and headed to North End Beach, where Ray and I plus agreed to meet.

There are plenty of beaches in Pitt. North End Beach is one of the least popular-which, of course, makes it one of my mother's favorites. The current is stronger there than it is at Moon Shoreline or Sunset Park. I am not exactly sure why. I do not mind. I have always been a strong swimmer. After that first time when my mother released her arms from around my waist and I felt both the

surging panic and the thrill, the enthusiasm- I learned quickly, and by four I was paddling out by myself past the breaks.

There are other reasons why most people avoid the North End Coastline, even though it is only a short walk down the hill from Eastern Prom, one of the most popular parks. The beach is nothing more than a short strip of rocky, gravel-flecked sand. It backs up against the far side of the lab complex, where the storage and waste sheds are, which does not make for particularly pretty scenery. And when you swim out at the East End riverside you get a clear view of Yellow Bridge and the wedge of unregulated land between Pittsburgh and Yarmouth... A lot of people do not like being so close to the Wilds. It makes them nervous. It makes me nervous too, except that there is a part of me- a tiny, little flick of a part-that likes it. For a while, after my mom died, I used to have these fantasies that she was not dead, really, and that my father was not dead either- that they had run away to the Wilds to be together.

Part: 14

Unrealities

He had gone five years before her, to prepare everything, to build a little house with a wood stove and furniture hewed from tree branches. At some point, I imagined they would come back and get me. I even imagined my room down to the smallest detail: a dark red carpet, a little red and green patchwork quilt, and a red chair.

I had the fantasy only a few times before I realized how wrong it was. If my parents had escaped to the Wilds, it would have made them sympathizers, and resisters. It was better than they were dead. Besides, I learned quickly that my fantasies about the Wilds were just that-make-believe, little kiddie stuff.

She says that is why the government does not bother doing anything about them and does not even acknowledge their survival.

They will die out soon enough, all of them, freeze or starve or just let the disease run its course, turn them against each other, have them raging and belligerent and clawing one another's eyes out.

The Invalids have nothing, no way of trading or getting red patchwork quilts or chairs, or anything else for that matter. She said that it has already transpired- she said the backwoods might be empty now, dark, and dead, full of only the rustle and whispers of animals.

Hanna once told me that they must live like animals, filthy, hungry, and desperate.

She is right about the other stuff-about the Invalids living like animals-but she is wrong about that. They are alive, and out there, and they do not want us to forget it. That is why they stage the demonstrations.

That is why they let the cows loose in the labs. I am not jumpy until I get to East End Beach. Even though the sun is sinking behind me, it lights the water white and makes everything sparkle. I shield my eyes from the glare and spot Ray down by the water, a long black brushstroke against all that blue. I flashback to last night, to the fingers of one of his hands just hard-pressed against my lower back, so lightly it was like I was only dreaming of them-the other hand cupping mine, dry and encouraging as a piece of wood warmed by the sun.

We danced, too, the dancing that people do at their wedding after the pairing has been formalized, but better somehow, looser, and less abnormal.

He has his back toward me, facing the ocean, and I am glad. I feel self-conscious as I- trudge down the wobbly, salt-warped stairs that lead from the parking lot to the beach, pausing to unlace and kick off my sneakers, which I carry in one hand.

The sand is warm on my bare feet as I set off toward him.

An old man is coming up from the water, carrying a fishing pole. He shoots me a suspicious glance, then turns to stare at Ray, then looks at me again and frowns. I open my mouth to say, 'He's cured,' but the man just grunts at me as he walks past, and I cannot imagine he would bother to call the regulators, so I do not say anything.

Not that we would get in trouble if we were caught- that is what Ray meant when he said, 'I'm safe'-but I do not want to answer a lot of questions and have my ID number run through SVS and all of that. Besides, if the regulators did haul ass out to North End Coastline to check out 'suspicious behavior,' only to discover it was some cured taking pity on a seventeen-year-old nobody, they would be annoyed and guaranteed to take it out on someone. Taking pity. I push the words out of my mind quickly, surprised by how difficult it is to even think of them.

All day I tried not to worry about why Ray would be so nice to me. I even imagined-for one brief, stupid second -that after my evaluation I would get matched with him. I had to shunt that thought aside too.

~*~

Night-

Freak me with her I said,' I said, giving him approval, taking him into my flesh, a soft offer to lunacy. My knees were weak, but he held me with one hand, managing me with the motion of his hips. I was entirely his to do what he wanted, and he knew it and I was going to give it more than her. I no longer believed in the idea of soul mates, or love at first sight. But then again, I began to believe that a very few times in your life, if you were lucky, you might meet a celebrity who was exactly right for you.

Not because he was perfect, or because you were, but because your combined flaws were arranged in a way that allowed two separate beings to hinge together. Done- I feel- I think you still love me, but we cannot escape the fact that I am not enough for you. I knew this was going to happen.

So-o I am not accusing you of falling in love with another girl. I am not angry, either. I should be, but I am not.

I just feel pain... a lot of pain. I thought I could envision how much this would hurt, but I was wrong so wrong, what am I the one that was wrong or you? I will love you always. When this red hair is white, I will still love you.

When the smooth softness of youth is replaced by the delicate softness of age, I will still want to touch your skin. When your face is full of the lines of every smile you have ever smiled, of every surprise I have seen flash through your eyes when every tear you have ever cried has left its mark upon your face, I will treasure you even more, because I was there to see it all. I will share your life with you, HANNA not KELLIE, and I will love you until the last breath leaves your body or mine.

My story ended that day- she started.

I was done with the three-way cheating.

~*~

Part: 15

Semi-kaput

He never really loved me or her or anybody- when we are half-finished, we are always searching for somebody to complete us.

When, after a few years or a few months of an association, we find that we are still exasperated, we blame our partners and take up somebody more promising. This can go on and on- series two-timing- pending we acknowledge that while a partner can add sweet magnitudes to our lives, we, each of us, are responsible for our fulfillment.

An insignificant person can offer it to us and have faith in it or else delude ourselves treacherously and database for eventual failure in every relationship we enter... it was just sex- no love.

That is why I ended it- or did I?

Or did he just want her?

Ernest Hemingway said- 'The most painful thing is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much and forgetting that you are special too.'

So right on- right? Every couple needs to argue now and then. Just to prove that the relationship is strong enough to survive. Long-term relationships, the ones that matter, are all about weathering the peaks and the valleys. Well, I have come back I do not know, should I stay, or should I go? What do you think I do well and what should I do?

I am smarter than her- and her and she too so you know what I will do.

Ray has already received his printed sheet, his recommended matches- he would have gotten it even before his cure, directly after the evaluations. He is not married yet because he is still in school, end of the story. But he will be as soon as he finishes.

~*~

It was just a fight- but it is me or her... He loves me only. We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of creating the perfect love. So, I will stay and take the freaking in the ass- like always.

Love- with him is better than none in high school- no?

Love is the answer, but while you are waiting for the answer, sex raises someone's loser feelings...

I went there for a week with the breakup- so yes you would do me too.

No hugging back just the nighttime friend- like before I was a teen girl- I am going to do this if I am not that girl.

I caught myself thinking about falling in love with someone whom I hoped was out there right now, unthinking about the possibility of me, but I quickly expatriated the notion. It was that kind of thinking that landed me in this situation, to begin with. Hope can ruin you. And it is not him any longer.

Do you see why?

Part: 16

Panties

Photo of me saying 'MFC girl with my green and white panties'- showing the text that said: 'SEE ME P*SSY!' ≈ Past remembers of Karly ≈

Kellie age 10- I am coming so hard! Like- um- ah-oh-ah- using my hair pink bush with my name on it, you do need one like this for this, mom and dad do get it- and it is on my dresser. I am not for my hair anymore, on my back and my knees up and down in and out I go, squirting and thick stuff too. Mum- yah!

You see me soloing for your baby.

My sis did this on cam, so she did not have to work at some fry- hole only making \$2.00 an hour, when playing with her hole she made- sh*t loads- I do it for me... like this.

And so, can you, like- it is safe. If I want, I can take cell vids and give them to my boyfriends... just say. That is up to you, but they love it.

Maybe we're gay so we did have to bang a boy three times a day yet still be the popular girls. Bi girls yes- you can call us that. that high school finding yourself and feeling out others.

Of course, then I started wondering about the kind of girl he has been matched with-someone like Hanna, I decided, with bright blond hair and an irritating ability to make even pulling her hair into a ponytail look graceful, like a choreographed dance.

There are four other people on the beach: a mother and a child, one hundred feet away, the mother sitting in a faded fabric folding chair, staring blankly toward the horizon, while the child- who is no more than three- toddlers in the waves, gets knocked over, lets out a shriek (of pain? pleasure?) and struggles back to her feet. 'Any fool can know. The point is to understand.'

Okay is it okay not to get it in high school then?

For I do not yet have to.

'Hi,' he says. 'I'm glad you came.'

I feel shy again, stupid holding my ratty shoes in one hand. I can feel my cheeks getting hot, so I look down, drop my shoes, and turn them over once in the sand with my toe. 'I said I would, didn't I?'

I do not mean for the words to come out so harshly and I wince, psychologically cursing myself. It is like there is a filter set up in my brain, except instead of making things better, it twists everything around so what comes out of my mouth is wrong, different from what I was thinking.

~*~

Further, then, a couple is walking, a man and a woman, not touching. They must be married. Both have their hands clasped in front of them, and both look straight ahead, not talking and not smiling, either, but calm, as though they are each surrounded by an invisible protective bubble.

Then I come up behind Ray and he turns and sees me, and smiles. The sun catches his hair, turning it momentarily white. Then it smolders back to its normal golden-brown color.

Thankfully, Ray laughs. 'I just meant that you stood me up last time,' he says.

He nods toward the sand. 'Sit?'

'Sure,' I say, relieved. I feel much less awkward once we are both settled in the sand. There is less chance of falling over or doing something dumb. I draw my legs up to my chest, resting my chin on my knees. Ray leaves a good two or three feet of space between us.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. At first, I am searching for something to say. Every beat of silence seems to stretch into infinity, and I am sure Ray must think I am mute.

But then he flicks a half-buried seashell out of the sand and hurls it into the ocean, and I realize he is comfortable at all.

I went back to being the loser girl- then freaking an asshole- I AM DONE!

Looser that is me... hope you are happy Ray- you did this to me in the halls.

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 21

Butterfly Kisses

Interval

Chapter: 2

Olivia- story's

Part: 1

Some photos of Neveah growing up... look through them... ≈ Past
remembers ≈

They say you fall in love only once but every time I see her, I fall in love with her all over repeatedly. He said to me, and I feel too that like any girl, even if I was not sure, about boys. Randy Zairus after that I relax.

I am even glad for the silence.

Sometimes, I feel like if you just watch things, just sit still, and let the world exist in front of you-sometimes I swear that just for a second time freezes and the world pauses in its tilt. Just for a second. In addition, if you somehow found a way to live in that second, then you would live forever.

I do the unthinkable and start dating a boy- going out,' I say.

Younger than me, lovely, but not cool.

Throwing yet another seashell in a high arc movement, it just hits the disruption.

~*~

We must countenance ourselves to be treasured by the individuals who love us, the people who matter. Too much of the time, we are blinded by our chases of people to love us, individuals that do not even matter, while all that time we waste and the public who do darling us have to stand on the footway and watch us beg in the streets! It is time to put an end to this. It is time for us to let ourselves be prized.

~*~

‘I know.’ The ocean is leaving a litter of pulpy green seaweed, twigs, and scrabbling hermit crabs in its wake, and the air smells tangy with salt and fish. A seagull pecks its way across the beach, blinking, leaving tiny, thatched claw prints. ‘My mom used to bring me here when I was little. We would walk out a little bit at low tide-as far as you can go, anyway. Crazy stuff gets stranded on the sand-horseshoe crabs and giant clams and sea anemone. Just gets left behind when the water goes out. She taught me to swim here too.’ I am not sure why the words bubble out of me then, why I have the sudden urge to talk.

‘My sister used to stay on the shore and build sandcastles, and we would pretend that they were real cities like we had swum to the other side of the world, to the uncured places. Except in our games, they were not diseased at all, or destroyed, or horrible. They were beautiful and peaceful, and built of glass and light and things.’

Randy stays silent, tracing shapes in the sand with a finger. But I can tell he is listening.

The word tumbles on: ‘I remember my mom would bounce me in the water on her hip. And then one time she just let me go. I mean, not for real - real. I had those little inflatable thingies on my arms. But I was so scared I started bawling my head off. I was only a few years old, but I remember it, I swear I do.

I was so relieved when she scooped me back up. But disappointed, too. Like I had lost the chance at something great, you know?’

‘So, what happened?’ Randy tips his head to look at me. ‘You do not come here anymore? Your mom loses her taste for the ocean?’ I look away, toward the horizon. The day is calm today. Flat, all shades of blue and purple as it draws away from the beach with a low sucking sound. Harmless. ‘She died,’ I say, surprised by how difficult it is to say.

He is quite next to me, and I rush on,

‘She killed herself. When I was six.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, so low and quiet

I almost miss it.

‘My dad died when I was eight months old. I do not remember him at all. I think -I think it broke her, you know?’

My mom, I mean. She was not cured. It did not work. I do not know why. She had the procedure three separate times, but it did not - it did not fix her.' I pause, sucking in a breath, afraid to look at him, who is as still and soundless next to me as a statue, like a carved piece of shadow. Still, I cannot stop speaking.

I realize, strangely, that I have never told the story of my mother before. I have never had to. Everyone around me, everyone in the school, all my neighbors, and my aunts' friends-they all knew about my family already, and my family's disgraceful secrets. That is why they always looked at me pityingly, from the corner of their eyes.

That is why for years I rode a wave of whispering into every room and was slapped with sudden silence when I entered silence and guilty, startled faces.

Even before she and I were desk partners in second grade.

I remember because she found me in the bathroom stall, crying into a piece of paper towel, stuffing my mouth with it so no one would hear, and she kicked the door right open with a foot and stood there staring. Is it because of your mom? she said the first words she ever spoke to me.

'I did not know there was something wrong with her. I did not know she was sick. I was too young to understand.' I keep my eyes focused on the horizon, a solid thin line, taut as a tightrope. The bay edges farther from us, and as always- I have the same fantasy I did as a child: that it will not come back, the whole ocean will disappear forever, drawn back across the surface of the earth like lips retracting over teeth, revealing the cool, white hardness underneath, the bleached bone. 'If I had known, maybe I could have-'

At the last second my voice falters and I cannot say anymore, cannot finish the sentence. I could have stopped it. It is a sentence I have never spoken before, never even allowed myself to think. But the idea is there, looming up solid and unavoidable, a sheer rock face: I could have stopped it. I should have stopped it.

We sit in silence. At some point during my story, the mother and child must have packed up and gone home; Alex and I are all alone on the beach. Now that the words are not bubbling, rushing out of me, I cannot believe how much I have shared with a next-to-perfect stranger- and a boy, no less. I am suddenly itching, squirming- embarrassed. I am desperate for something else to

say- something harmless, about the tide or the weather but, as usual, my mind goes blank now that I need it to function. I am afraid to look at her now, my old lover.

When I finally work up the courage to shoot him a tiny sidelong glance, he is sitting, staring out at the bay. His face is completely unreadable except for a tiny muscle, which flutters in and out at the base of his jaw. My heart sinks... just like I feared- he is ashamed of me now, disgusted by my family's history, by the disease that runs in my blood. At any second, he will stand up and tell me it is better if he does not speak to me anymore.

It is weird... I do not even really know...

She or him, and there is an impassable divide between us, but the idea upsets me anyway.

I am two seconds away from jumping up and running away, just so I will not have to nod and pretend to understand when he turns to me and says, Listen, Lena. I am sorry, but - and gives me that all-too-familiar look.

(Last year there was a rabid dog loose on the Hill, biting and snapping at everyone, frothing at the mouth. It was half-starved, mangy, he- and like her missing one leg, but still it took two police officers to shoot it down. A crowd gathered to watch, and I was there. I stopped on the way back from my run. For the first time in my life, I understood the look that people had been giving me forever, the same curl of the lip whenever they hear the name Maddie, yes-but disgust, also and fear of contamination. It was the same way they were looking at the dog while he circled and snapped and spit, and then a mass exhalation of relief when the third bullet finally took him down and he stopped twitching.)

Just when I think I cannot take it anymore; he reaches over and barely skims my elbow with one finger.

'I'll race you,' he says, standing up and beating the sand off his shorts. He spreads a handout to me and helps me up, a smile flickering back on his face.

I am endlessly grateful to him for that second. He is not going to hold my family's past against me. He does not think I am dirty or damaged. He pulls me to my feet, and he squeezes my hand once I am standing, a quick pulse, and I am startled and happy, thinking of my secret sign with Hanna.

'Only if you've got a thing for total humiliation,' I say...

He raises his eyebrows... 'So-o, you think you can beat me?'

‘I don’t think, I know...’

‘We’ll see about that.’ she cocks his head to the side. ‘First one to the buoys, then?’

That throws me. The tide does not go out too far in the bay; the buoys are still floating on at least four feet of water.

‘You want to race into the bay?’ ‘Scared?’ he asks, grinning.

‘I’m not scared, I’m just-’ ‘Good.’ He reaches out and brushes my shoulder with two fingers. ‘Then how about a little less conversation, and a little more-Go!’ He screams out the last word and takes off at full speed. It takes me two whole seconds to launch myself after him, and I am calling out, ‘No fair! I was not ready!’ and both of us are laughing as we splash through the shallows in our clothes, the little ripples, and dips of the ocean floor now exposed by the tide’s retreat. Shells crunch under my feet.

I get my toe caught in a tangle of red and purple seaweed and nearly do a faceplant.

I push myself off the wet sand with a palm and get my balance again, have almost caught up to Randy, when he drops down in a way- and scoops up a handful of wet sand, whirling around to peg me with it.

I shriek and duck out of the way, but a bit of it still catches me on the cheek, dribbling down my neck.

‘You are such a cheater!’ I managed to gasp, out of breath from running and laughing.

‘You can’t cheat if there are no rules,’ Alex shoots back over his shoulder.

‘No rules, hum?’ We are wallowing shin-deep now and I start palming water at him, making a splatter pattern over his back and shoulders. He turns around, sweeping his arm across the surface of the water, a glittering arc. I twist to avoid it and end up slipping and falling elbow deep, soaking my shorts and the bottom half of my T-shirt, the impulsive cold making me gasp. He is still slogging forward, his head craned back, his smile dazzling, his laugh rolling off and away so loud I imagine it dipping past Great Diamond Island and over the horizon, reaching other parts of the world. I scrambled up and hauled after him.

The buoys are bobbing twenty feet ahead of us and the water is at my knees, and then my thighs, and then to my waist, until both of us are half running and half swimming, frantically paddling forward with our arms. I can't breathe or think or do anything but laugh and splash and focus on the bright red bobbing buoys, focus on winning, winning, I have to win, and when we're only a few feet away and he's still in the lead and my shoes are leaden and filled with water, my clothes dragging me down like my pockets have been weighed with stones, without thinking I leap forward and tackle him, wrestling down into the water, feeling my foot connect with his thigh as I rocket off of him and reach out to slap the nearest buoy, the plastic shooting away from my hand when, I hit it. We must be a quarter mile off the beach, but the tide's still going out, so I cannot stand the water hitting me in my chest.

Part: 2

He reached for her hand. She jerked her head up, eyes wide. 'Stay,' he repeated. 'I could use the company.' She hesitated. A rueful smile pulled at his lips. 'I promise I will not try to kiss you again... tonight. I raise my arms triumphantly as Ray comes up spluttering water, shaking his head so water pinwheels from his hair.

~*~

'Don't stop, please,' You're so freaking beautiful when you come on me,' he said, cupping her face, nuzzling her mouth.

Kissing him longer, unwilling to let him go.

This is what I want; this is what I have wanted since his damn phone interrupted us this morning, his mouth, his body claiming mine. 'Now turn around and bend over. I need to ride you.' His forehead pressed to mine as we gasped together, the chilly air barely cooling the heat raging between us. Tate opened her eyes and let out a wobbly giggle. 'Bend over the bed? It goes in and out of me, and it drips on my back his gift to me. After being on my feet the whole night? I do not think so, friend.

Now,' he said- as he lifted her left my leg and spared, we wide open showing my slight, hooked his elbow under her knee, and entered her- I am on fire, every muscle in my body attuned to his, my groin clenching with delicious need. When the voices grow louder his hand loosens.

I begged into his mouth.

Diving into me once more his tongue slays me, erases every thought of the outside world until the passion has left us breathless and we must break away if only to live. He opens wide and I squirt it in... and he loves me for it so fixed after, the- comes and comes again.

Maddie- I missed talking to you, playing with you, touching you, and seeing you smile. I missed just ... sitting next to you. I have never missed anyone or anything that much.

Yet- I am freaking him hard now with her in my mind doing the same. I still love her, yet I do not move him.

~*~

(Things we did)

‘I won,’ I pant- it out.

‘You cheated,’ he says, pushing forward a few more steps and collapsing with both arms behind him, looped over the rope stringing along the buoys. He arches his back, so his face is tilted up toward the sky. His T-shirt is completely soaked, and water beads off his eyelashes trickle down his cheeks.

‘No rules,’ I say, ‘so no cheating.’

He turns to me, grinning. ‘I let you win, then.’

‘Yeah, right.’

I splash him a little and he holds up his hands, surrendering.

‘You’re just a sore loser.’

‘I don’t have much practice at it.’

There is that confidence again, that semi-infuriating easiness of his, the tilt of his head, and the smile. But today it is not infuriating. Today I like it, feel like it is somehow rubbing off on me if I were around him enough, I would never feel awkward, frightened, or insecure.

‘Whatever.’

I roll my eyes and hook one arm over the buoys next to him, enjoying the feel of the currents swishing around my chest, enjoying the strangeness of being in the bay with my clothes on, the stickiness of my T-shirt, and the sucking

of my shoes on my feet. Soon the tide will turn, and the water will come in again. Then it will be a slow, exhausting swim back to the beach.

Even if a girl is gay- like I was she still might just love a boy too, it was all for a boy breaking her heart that she turns that way and turned away.

Part: 3

On the other hand, I do not care. I do not care about anything- I am not worried about how in a million years I will explain to Liz why I have come home soaking wet, with seaweed clinging to my back and the smell of salt in my hair, not worried about how long I have until curfew or why Randy is even being nice to me. I am simply happy, a pure, bubbly feeling.

Beyond the buoys the bay is dark purple, the waves brushed over with whitecaps.

It is illegal to go beyond the buoys- beyond the buoys are the islands and the lookout points, and beyond them is the open ocean, the ocean that leads to unregulated places, places of disease and fear- but for that moment- I fantasize about ducking underneath the rope and swimming out.

To our left, we can see the bright white silhouette of the lab complex and beyond it, distantly, Old Haven, all the docks like gigantic wooden centipedes. To our right is a covered bridge, and the long string of guard huts that runs its length and continues up along the border catches me looking.

‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ he says.

The bridge is mottled gray green, all coated in backsplash and algae, and it looks like it is leaning slightly into the wind. I wrinkle my nose. ‘It looks like it is rotting, doesn’t it?’

Part: 4

My sister always said that someday it would fall into the ocean, just topple right over.’ Randy laughs. ‘I wasn’t talking about the bridge.’ He tilts his chin just slightly, gesturing. ‘I meant past the bridge.’ He pauses for just a fraction of a second. ‘I meant the Wilds.’

Beyond the bridge is the northern border, located along the far side of Black and Gold Cove. As we are standing there the lights in the guard huts click on, one after another, shining out against the deepening blue sky- a sign that it is getting late, and I should be going home soon. Still, I cannot force myself to

leave, even as I feel the water around my chest start to bubble and eddy, the tide turning.

Beyond the bridge, the lush greens of the Wilds move together in the wind like an endlessly re-arranging wall, a thick wedge of green cutting down toward the bay, and separating Pitt.

From here we can just make out the barest section of it, an empty place marked with no lights, no boats, and no buildings: impenetrable, strange, and black. But I know that the wilderness extends back, going on for miles and miles and miles all through the mainland, across the country, like a monster reaching its tentacles around the civilized parts of the world.

It was the race or beating him to the buoys, or the fact that he did not criticize me or my family when I told him about my mother, but at that moment the giddiness and happiness are still flowing strong and I feel like I could tell Randy anything, ask him anything. So, I say, 'Can I tell you a secret?' I do not wait for him to answer; I do not have to and knowing that makes me feel dizzy and careless. 'I used to think about it a lot. The Wilds, I mean, and what they were like - and the Invalids, whether they existed.' Out of the corner of my eye, I see him flinch slightly, so I press on, 'I used to sometimes think - I used to pretend that my mom did not die, you know? She had only run away to the Wilds. Not that that would be any better. I guess I just did not want her to be gone for good. It was better to imagine her out there somewhere, singing.' I break off, shaking my head, amazed that I feel so comfortable talking to Randy. Amazed, and grateful. 'What about you?' I speak.

'What about me?' Ray is watching me with an expression I cannot read. Like I have hurt him, but that does not make any sense.

'Did you used to think about going to the Wilds when you were little? Just for fun, I mean, like a game.'

Alex squints, looks away from me, and grimaces. 'Yeah, sure. A lot.' He reaches out and slaps the buoys. 'None of these. No walls to run into. No eyes.'

Freedom and space to stretch out. I still think about the Wilds.'

I stared at him. Nobody uses words like that anymore: freedom, space. Old words. 'Still? Even after this?'

Liz looks hot in a swimsuit; I see her without the top and I want her not him.

Without meaning to or thinking about it I reach out and brush my fingers, once, against the three-pronged scar on his neck.

He jerks away from my touch as though I have scalded him, and I drop my hand, embarrassed.

‘Liz -’ he says, in the strangest voice: like my name is a sour thing, a word that tastes bad in his mouth.

I know I should not have touched him like that. I have overstepped my boundaries, and he is going to remind me of it, of what it means to be uncured. I think I will die of humiliation if he starts to lecture me, so to cover the discomfort I start babbling. ‘Most curds do not think about that kind of stuff. - She always said it was a waste of time. She always said there was nothing out there but animals and land and bugs, that all the talk of Invalids was make-believe stuff, kid stuff. She said believing in Invalids is the same thing as believing in necromancers or fallen angels.

Remember how people used to say there were fallen angels in the Wilds?’ she smiles, but it is more like a wince. ‘Liz, I have to tell you something.’ Her voice is a little stronger now, but something about his tone makes me afraid to let him speak.

Now I cannot stop talking. ‘Did it hurt?

The procedure, I mean.

My sister said it was no big deal, not with all the painkillers they give you, but my cousin Marcia used to say it was worse than anything, worse than having a baby, even though her second kid took, like, fifteen hours to deliver-’ I break off, blushing, mentally cursing myself for the ridiculous conversational turn.

I wish I could rewind to last night’s party when my brain was coming up empty; it is like I have been saving up for a case of verbal vomit. ‘I’m not scared, though,’ I nearly screamed, as she again opened her mouth to speak. I am desperate to salvage the situation somehow. ‘My procedure’s coming up. Seventy days. It is dorky, huh?

That I count. But I cannot wait.’

I may fall for another girl that day.

‘Liz.’ Randy’s voice is stronger, and more forceful now, and it finally stops me. He turns so that we are face-to-face. At that moment, my shoes skim off the sand bottom, and I realize that the water was lapping up to my neck. The tide is coming fast. ‘Listen to me. I am not who-I am not who you think I am.’

I must fight to stand. Suddenly, the currents tug and pull at me. It has always seemed this way. The tide goes out a slow drain and comes back in a rush.

‘What do you mean?’

His eyes-shifting gold, amber, an animal’s eyes-search my face, and without knowing why I am scared again.

‘I was never cured,’ he says. For a moment I close my eyes and imagine I have misheard him, imagine I have only confused the shushing of the waves for his voice. But when I open my eyes, he is still standing there, staring at me, looking guilty, and something else-sad, maybe? ...And I know I heard correctly.

He says, ‘I never had the procedure.’

‘You mean it didn’t work?’ I speak. My body is tingling, going numb, and I realize then how cold it is. ‘You had the procedure, and it did not work? Like what happened to my mom?’

‘Nope, Liz.’ He looks away, squinting, and says under his breath, ‘I don’t know how to explain.’

Part: 5

Everything from the tips of my fingers through the roots of my hair now feels as if it is encased in ice. Disconnected images run through my head, skipping a movie reel: Randy standing on the observation deck, his hair like a crown of leaves; turning his head, showing the neat four-split scar just beneath his left ear; reaching out to me and saying, I am safe. I will not hurt you. The words start rattling out of me again, but I do not feel them, hardly feel anything. ‘It did not work, and you have been lying about it.

Dishonest, so you could still go to school, still get a job, still get paired and matched, and everything. But you are not-you are still-you might still be’ I cannot bring myself to say the word. Diseased. Uncured, sick, I feel like I will be sick.

~*~

Me- a school day- 'I hope I didn't disturb anything.'

'You didn't.' My cheeks are hot. I wish I could reach out and take my stupid bra-pink, with patterns of daisies on it, like a teen or under the bra and shove it under the sofa, but that would be even more conspicuous. So instead, we both pretend we do not notice.

'Okay...' Maddie draws out the word, super long as if she knows I am lying. For a second he says nothing. Then, slowly, he comes down the stairs, edging closer, as if I am an animal who might be rabid.

'Are you all, right? You seem-'

'I see what?' I look up at him then, experiencing a hot flash of anger.

'Nothing.' He stops again, a good ten feet away from me. 'I do not know.'

'Upset... angry or something.' He pronounces his next words very carefully as if each one is glass that might shatter in his mouth. 'Is everything okay with you?' I feel stupid sitting on the couch when he is standing, like I am at a disadvantage somehow, so I stand up, too, crossing my arms. 'We're fine,' I say. 'I'm fine.' I had been planning to tell Maddie about the breakup-the second I saw his stupid stuff on the stairs, I knew I would tell him, and even tell him why, cry and confess that there is something wrong with me and I do not know how to be happy, and I am an idiot, such an idiot.

But now I cannot tell him. I will not.

Then I say, 'her sister is not home.' Maddie flinches and turns away, a muscle working in his jaw. Even in midwinter, he has the kind of skin that always looks tan. I wish he looked worse. I wish he looked as bad as I feel. 'Well, you're here for her, aren't you?'

Maddie- 'Jesus, Liv.' She turns back to me then. 'We need to - I do not know - fix this. Fix us.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I say, squeezing my ribs hard. I feel like if I do not, I might just come apart.

'You do know what I mean,' he says. 'You are-where-my best friend.'

With one hand, he gestures to the space between us, the long stretch of the basement, where for years we built pillow forts and competed to see who could withstand tickle wars the longest. 'What happened?'

Liv- 'What happened is you started dating one more time- it is on and off...

'My sister,' I say. The words came out louder than I intended.

Parker takes a step toward me. 'I didn't mean to hurt you,' he says, his voice quiet, and for a second, I want to close the distance between us and bury myself in the soft place between his arm and shoulder blade, and tell her how dumb I have been, and let him cheer me up with bad renditions songs and weird trivia about the world's largest hamburgers or freestanding structures built entirely from toothpicks.

'I did not mean to hurt either of you. It just - happened.' He is practically whispering now. 'I'm trying to stop it.'

I take a step backward. 'You're not trying very hard,' I say. I know I am being a bitch, but I do not care. He is the one who ruined everything.

Edward- He is the one who kissed her, who keeps kissing her, and I do not like it she is my girl- mine. Who keeps telling her yes, no matter how many times they break up? 'I'll let her know you came by.'

Maddie's face changes. And at that moment, I knew I had hurt him, just as much as he had hurt me. I get a sick rush of triumph that feels virtually like seasickness, like catching an insect between the folds of a paper towel and embracing it.

Part: 6

Then he just- looks angry- hard, like his skin has suddenly tightened into stone.

'Yeah, all right.' He takes two steps backward before spinning around. 'Tell her I am looking for her. Tell her I am worried about her.'

~*~

'Sure...' My voice sounds unacquainted as if it is being piped in from somewhere a thousand miles away. I broke up with Kristy. And for what? Maddie and I are not even friends anymore, yet we say that all the time- not true. I have screwed up everything. Suddenly I thought I might be sick.

'Oh, and Kristy?' Maddie pauses at the foot of the stairs. Her expression is impossible to read for a second, I think he might try and apologize again. 'Your shirt's on inside out.'

Then he is gone, sprinting up the stairs, leaving me alone.

~*~

'No,' Maddie's voice is so loud it startles me. I take a step back, sneakers slipping on the slick and uneven bottom of the ocean floor, and nearly go under, but when Maddie makes a move to touch me, I jerk backward, out of his reach.

Something hardens in her face like he is decided. 'I am telling you I was never cured. Never paired or matched or anything. I was never even evaluated.'

'Impossible.' The word barely squeezes itself out, a murmur. The sky is whirling above me, all blues, pinks, and reds twirling together until it looks like parts of the sky are wringing.

Part: 7

I/we girls should know we are beautiful just the way we are... 'We do not need to change a thing; the world could change its heart. No scars to your beauty, we are stars, and we are beautiful, and you do not have to change a thing, the world could change its heart. No scars to your beauty, we are stars, and we are beautiful. She has dreams to be envious, so she is starving. You know, cover girls eat nothing.

She says beauty is pain and there's beauty in everything. What is a little bit of hunger? I could go a little while longer, but she fades away- she does not see her perfect, she does not understand she is worth it... Or that beauty goes deeper than the surface 'Impossible.' -Scars to Your Beautiful by Alessia Cara ...has the song of a teen girl's life...

'You have the scars.' 'Scars,' he corrects me, a little more gently. 'Just scars. Not the scars.' He looks away then, giving me a view of his neck. 'Three tiny scars, an inverted triangle. Easy to replicate. With a scalpel, a penknife, anything.'

I closed my eyes again. The waves swell around me, and the motion, the lift, and the drop convince me I really will throw up, right here in the water. I choke down the feeling, trying to hold back the realization that is battering at the back of my mind, threatening to overwhelm me -fighting back the feeling of drowning.

I open my eyes and croak out, 'How-?'

‘You must understand. Lena, I trust you. Do you see that?’ He is staring at me so intently that I can feel his eyes touch, and I keep my eyes averted. ‘I didn’t mean to—I didn’t want to lie to you.’

‘How?’ I repeat, louder now.

Somehow my brain gets stuck on the word lie and makes an endless loop: No way to avoid evaluations unless you lie.

No way to avoid the procedure unless you lie. You must lie.

For a moment, Maddie is silent, and he is going to chicken out, refusing to tell me anything more. I almost wish he would. I am desperate to rewind time, go back to the moment before he said my name in that strange tone of voice, go back to the triumphant, surging feeling of beating him to the buoys. We will race back to the beach. We will meet up tomorrow and try to wheedle some fresh crabs from the fishers at the dock.

But then he speaks. ‘I’m not from here,’ he says. ‘I mean, I was not born in Pittsburgh. Not exactly.’ He is speaking in the tone of voice that everyone uses when they are about to break you apart.

Gentle-kind, even-like they can make the news sound better just by speaking in a lullaby voice. I am sorry, Liv, but your mother was a troubled girl.

Like you will not somehow hear the violence underneath.

‘Where are you from?’ I do not have to ask. I know already.

The comprehension has broken, spilled, swarming me. But a slight part of me believes that if he does not say it, it is not factual.

~*~

Her eyes are steady on mine, but he tilts his head back toward the border, beyond the bridge, to that endlessly moving preparation of branches, leaves, and vines and tangled, growing things.

‘There,’ she says, or she says it. His lips barely move. But the meaning is clear.

He comes from the wilderness.

‘An Invalid,’ I say. The word feels like it is grating against my throat.

‘You’re an Invalid.’ I am giving him a final chance to deny it.

But he does not. He just winces slightly and says, 'I've always hated that word.'

Standing there, I comprehend something else: that it was not a coincidence whenever Liv made fun of me for still believing in the Invalids, whenever she would shake her head without bothering to look up from her knitting needlestick, tick, tick, they went together, flashing metal-and say, 'I presume you have faith in fallen and witches, too?' They suck! It is like the movie- love it or love to hate it, that is us.

Fallen angels and wizards and Invalids: things that will tear into you, tear you to shreds. Deadly things.

I am suddenly so frightened a desperate pressure starts pushing down to the bottom of my stomach and between my legs, and for one wild and ridiculous second, I am positive that I am about to pee.

The lighthouse on Little Island clicks on out in the outer parts, not in the city, and cuts a wide swath across the water, an enormous, accusatory finger: I am terrified I will get caught up in its beam, terrified it will point in my direction and then I will overhear the whirling of the state helicopters and the megaphone voices of the regulators shouting, 'Illegal activity! Illegal activity!' The beach looks hopelessly and impossibly remote. I cannot imagine how we got out so far. My arms feel heavy and useless, and I think of my mother, and her jacket filling slowly with water.

I take deep breaths, trying to keep my mind from spinning, trying to focus.

There is no way for anyone to know that Alex is an Invalid. I did not know. He looks normal and has the scar in the right place. There is no way anyone could have heard us talking.

A wave lifts- and breaks against my back. I blunder forward. Maddie reaches out and grabs my arm to steady me, but I twist away from him just as the second round of waves surges over us. I get a mouthful of seawater, feel the salt stinging my eyes, and am momentarily blinded.

'Don't,' I stutter. 'Don't you dare touch me?'

'Liv, I swear. I did not mean to hurt you. I did not want to lie to you.' 'Why are you doing this?' I cannot think straight, I can hardly even breathe. 'What do you want from me?'

‘Want...?’ she shakes his head. She looks honestly confused and offended, too, as though I am the one who did something wrong. Aimed at a second, I feel a flash of sympathy for him. She sees it on my face, that segment of a second when I let my guard down because at that moment his expression softens, and his eyes go bright as flame, and even though I barely see him move, suddenly he has closed the space between us and he is wrapping his warm hands over my shoulders-fingers so warm and strong I almost cry out-and saying, ‘Lena. I like you, okay? That is, it. That is all... I like you.’

His voice is so low and hypnotic it reminds me of a song. I think of predators dropping silently from trees: I think of enormous cats with glowing amber eyes, just like him.

And then I am stumbling backward, paddling away from him, my shirt, and shoes heavy with water, my heart hammering painfully against my chest and my breath rasping in my throat. I am kicking off the ground and sweeping forward with my arms, half running, half swimming, as the tide lifts and drags at me so I feel like I can only creep forward an inch at a time, so I feel like I am moving through molasses. Alex calls my name, but I am too afraid to turn my head and see if he is coming after me. It is like one of those nightmares where something’s chasing you, but you are too afraid to look and see what it is. All you hear is its breath, getting closer and closer.

You feel its shadow forthcoming up behind you, but you are paralyzed: You know that any second, you will feel its icy fingers closing on your neck.

I will never make it, I think. I will never make it back. Something scrapes across my shin, and I begin to imagine that the bay around me is full of horrible underwater things, sharks and jellyfish and poisonous eels, and even though I know I am panicking I want to fall backward and give up. The beach is still so far, and my arms and legs feel so heavy.

Her voice gets whipped away by the wind, sounding fainter and fainter, and when I finally work up the courage to look over my shoulder, I see him bobbing up and down by the buoys. I realize I have gone farther than I thought, and at the very least she is not following me. My fear eases up, and the knot in my chest loosens.

The next wave is so strong it helps skim me over a steep underwater ridge and drops me to my knees into the soft sand. When I struggle to my feet the water hits me just at the waist, and I slosh the rest of the way to shore, shivering, grateful and exhausted.

My thighs are shaking. I collapsed onto the beach, gasping and coughing. From the flames of color licking across the sky over Back and Gold Cove-orange, reds, pinks- I am guessing it is close to sunset, around eight o'clock. Part of me wants to just lie down, spread my arms, stretch out, and sleep all through the night. I feel like I have swallowed half my weight in saltwater.

My skin stings and there's sand everywhere, in my bra and underwear and between my toes and under my fingernails. Whatever scraped my shin in the water left its mark: a long trickle of blood snakes around my calf.

I look up, and for one panicked second, I cannot find Maddie by the buoys. My heart stops. Then I saw him, a black spot cutting quickly through the water. His arms pinwheel gracefully as he swims. He is fast. I haul myself to my feet, grab my shoes, and limp up to my bike. My legs are so weak it takes me a minute to find my balance, and at first, I weave crazily up and down the road like a toddler just learning to ride.

I do not look back, not once, until I am at my gate. By then the streets are empty and quiet, night about to fall, curfew about to come down like a giant whole-hearted embrace, keeping us all in our places, keeping us all innocuous.

Part: 8

Olivia- Think of it this way: When it is cold outside and your teeth are chattering, you bundle up in a winter coat, scarves, and mittens, to keep from catching the flu. Well, the borders are like hats and scarves and winter coats for the whole country! They keep the very worst disease away, so we can all stay healthy!

After the borders went up, the president and the Consortium had one last thing to take care of before we could all be safe and happy.

(Back)

She cried all the time, and once she confessed to me that when I liked to kiss her tears away. Still, now, when I think of that day's I, was only eight at the time I think of the taste of salt.

The disease slowly worked its way deeper and deeper inside of her, an animal chewing her from within. My sister could not eat. What little we could convince her to swallow came up just as quickly, and I was afraid for her life. Thomas broke her heart, of course, to nobody's surprise.

~*~

Then my sister did nothing but lie in bed and watch the shadows shift slowly across the walls, her ribs rising under her pale skin like wood rising through water. Even then she refused the procedure and the comfort it would give her, and on the day the cure was to be administered it took four scientists and several needles full of tranquilizer before she would submit would stop scratching with her long, sharp nails, which had gone uncut for weeks, and screaming and cursing and calling for Thomas. I watched them come for her, to take her to the labs; I sat in a corner, terrified, while she spit, hissed, and kicked, and I thought of my mom and dad.

That afternoon, though I was still more than a decade away from safety, I began to count the months until my procedure. In the end, my sister was cured. She came back to me gentle and content, her nails spotless and round, her hair pulled back in a long, thick braid.

Several months later she was pledged to an IT tech, her age, and several weeks after she graduated from college they married, their hands linked loosely under the canopy, both staring straight ahead as though at a future of days unmarred by worry or discontent or disagreement, a future of identical days, like a series of neatly blown bubbles.

Thomas was cured too. She was married to Ella, once my sister's best friend, and now everybody is happy. Rachel told me a few months ago that the two couples often see each other at picnics and neighborhood events since they live close to each other in the East End.

The four of them sit, making polite and quiet conversation, with not a sole flicker of the past to disturb the stillness and completeness of the present.

That is the beauty of the cure. No one mentions those lost, hot days in the field when Thomas kissed Rachel's tears away and invented worlds just so he could promise them to her when she tore the skin off her arms at the thought of living without him. I am sure she is embarrassed by those days if she remembers them at all.

True, I do not see her that often now just once every couple of months, when she remembers, she is supposed to stop by-and in that way, I guess you could say that even with the procedure I lost a little bit of her. But that is not the point. The point is that she is protected. The point is that she is safe.

Part: 9

I will tell you another secret, this one for your good. You may think the past has something to tell you. You may think that you should listen, should strain to make out its whispers, should bend over backward, stoop down low to hear its voice breathed up from the ground, from the dead places.

You may think there is something in it for you, something to understand or make sense of. But I know the truth: I know from the nights of Coldness.

I know the past will drag you backward and down, have you snatching at whispers of wind and the gibberish of trees rubbing together, trying to decipher some code, trying to piece together what was broken. It is hopeless. The past is nothing but a weight. It will build inside of you like a stone.

Take it from me: If you hear the past speaking to you, feel it tugging at your back and running its fingers up your spine, the best thing to do is run. In the days that follow Maddie's confession, I check constantly for symptoms of the disease.

When I am staffing the register at my uncle's store I lean forward on my elbow, keep my hand resting on my cheek so I can crook my fingers back toward my neck and count my pulse, making sure it is normal.

In the mornings I take long, slow breaths, listening for rasping or hitches in my lungs. I wash my hands constantly. I know the deliria is not like a cold you cannot get it from being sneezed on—but still, it is contagious, and when I woke up the day after our meeting at East End with my limbs still heavy and my head as light as a bubble and an ache in my throat that refused to go away, my first thought was that I had been infected. After a few days, I feel better.

The only weird thing is the way my senses have dulled. Everything looks washed out, like a bad color copy. I must load my food with salt before I can taste it, and every time my aunt speaks to me it seems like her voice has been muted a few degrees. But I read 'The Book of Sh- of life,' and all the recognized symptoms of deliria, and do not see anything that matches up, so in the end, I figure I am safe. Still, I take precautions, determined not to make one false step, determined to prove to myself that I am not like my mother—that the thing with Ray was a fluke, a mistake, a horrible, horrible accident.

I cannot ignore how close I was to danger. I do not even want to think about what would happen if anyone found out what she was if anyone knew that we had stood together shivering in the water, that we had talked, laughed, and touched.

It makes me feel sick. I must keep repeating to myself that my procedure is less than two months away now.

All I must do is keep my head down and make it through the next seven weeks and I will be fine.

I come home every evening a full two hours before curfew. I volunteer to spend extra days at the store, and I do not even ask for my usual eight-dollar-an-hour wage.

Maddie does not call me. I do not call her, either. I help my aunt cook dinner, and I clean and wash the dishes unprompted.

Maggie is in summer school -she is only in first grade, and they are already talking about holding her back- and every night I pull her onto my lap and help her sludge through her work, whispering in her ear, begging her to speak, to focus, to listen, cajoling her, finally, into writing at least half of the answers down in her workbook.

After a week, my aunt stops looking at me suspiciously whenever I walk into the house and stops demanding to know where I have been, and another weight eases off me: She trusts me again. It was not easy to explain why she and I would decide on an impromptu swim in the ocean in our clothes, no less just after a big family dinner, it would be even harder to explain why I came home pale and shaking, and I could tell my aunt did not buy it. But after a while she relaxes around me again and stops looking at me distrustfully like I am some caged-up animal she is worried will go feral.

Days pass, time ticks away, and seconds click forward like dominoes toppling in a line. Every day the heat gets worse and worse. It creeps through the streets of Pitt., festers in the Dumpsters, and makes the city smell like a giant armpit. The walls sweat and the trolleys cough and shudder, and every day people gather in front of the municipal buildings, praying for a brief blast of chilly air whenever the mechanized doors swoosh open because a regulator, politician, or guard must go in and out.

I must give up my runs. The last time I do a full loop outside my feet carry me down to the Square, past the Governor. The sun is a high white haze, all the buildings cut sharply against the sky like a series of metal teeth. By the time I make it to the statue

I am panting, exhausted, and my head is spinning. When I grab the Governor's arm and swing myself up onto the statue's base, the metal burns

underneath my hand, and the world seesaws crazily, light zigzagging everywhere. I am dimly aware that I should go inside, out of the heat, but my brain is all foggy and so there I go, poking my fingers around the hole in the Governor's cupped fist. I do not know what I am looking for. She already told me that the note he had left for me months ago must have turned to pulp by now. My fingers come out sticky, pieces of melting gum stringing between my thumb and forefinger, but still, I root around. And then it slides between my fingers, cool and crisp, folded in a square: a note.

I am half-delirious as I open it, but still, I do not expect it to be from her.

My hands begin to shake as I read:

Maddie, I am so sorry. Please forgive me.

Your lover girl-

I do not remember the run home, and my aunt finds me later half passed out in the hallway, murmuring to myself. She must put me in a bathtub full of ice to get my temperature down. When I finally came too, I could not find the note anywhere.

I realize I must have dropped it and feel half-relieved and half-disappointed.

That evening we read that the Time and Temperature Building registered 102 degrees: the hottest day on record for the summer so far.

~*~

My aunt forbids me to run outside for the rest of the summer. I do not put up a fight. I do not trust myself, cannot be sure my feet will not lead me back down to the Governor, to East End Beach, up the coast, to the labs. I receive a new date for the evaluations and spend my evenings in front of the mirror rehearsing my answers.

My aunt insists on accompanying me to the labs again, but this time I did not see Hana. I do not see anyone I recognize. Even the four evaluators are different: floating oval faces, different shades of brown and pink, and two-dimensional, like shaded drawings. I am not afraid of this time. I do not feel anything.

Part: 10

I answered all the questions exactly as I should have. When I am asked to give my favorite color, for just the briefest, tiniest of seconds my mind flashes in the sky the color of polished silver, and I hear a word-gray-whispered quietly into my ear.

I say, 'Blue,' and everyone smiles. I say, 'I'd like to study psychology and social regulation.' I say, 'I like to listen to music, but not too loudly.' I say, 'The definition of happiness is security.' Smiles, smiles, smiles all around, a room full of teeth.

After I am done, as I am leaving, I see a shifting shadow, a flicker in my peripheral vision. I glance up quickly at the observation deck. Of course, it is empty.

Interval: 22

Lips Together

Chapter: 3

Part: 1

Hanna

Hanna- Two days later we receive the results of my boards-all passes-and my final score: Eight. My aunt hugged me; the first time she has hugged me in years.

My uncle pats me on the shoulder awkwardly and gives me the largest piece of chicken at dinner. Even Jenny looks impressed by this.

Olivia rams the top of her head into my leg, one, two, three times, and I step away from her and tell her to stop fussing. I know she is upset that I will be leaving her soon. We do a lot as girlfriends.

But that's life, and the sooner she gets used to it, the better.

I received my 'Approved Matches' too, a list of four names and statistics-age, scores, interests, recommended career paths, and salary

projections printed neatly on a white sheet of paper with the Pittsburgh city crest at its top.

At least Maddie is not on it. I recognize only one name: Kellie. She has bright hair now and teeth that stick out like not much yet are cute. I only know him because once when I was playing outside last year with him, he started chanting, 'There goes the retard and the orphan Maggie,' and without really thinking about what I was doing, I scooped up a rock from the ground and turned around and hurled it in his direction. It caught him in the temple. For a second his eyes crossed and uncrossed.

He lifted his fingers to his head, and when he pulled them away, they were dark with blood. For days afterward, I was terrified to go out, terrified I would be arrested and thrown in the Vaults. Shy- now owned a tech services firm and was a volunteer regulator besides. I was convinced she would come after me for what I had done to his son doing that thing on his little man as an RN.

~*~

Part: 2

Kellie- (Now)

My arms are aching, and whenever I close my eyes, I see barcodes, and then I am so sleepy I am not even embarrassed to be out in public wearing my paint spotted Save a lot of T-shirts, which is about ten sizes too big for me.

Hanna looks away, biting her lip. I have not spoken to her since that night at the party and I am searching desperately for something to say, something casual and normal.

It suddenly seems incredible to me that this was my best friend, that we could spend time together for days and never run out of things to talk about, that I would come home from her house with my throat sore from laughing. It is like there is a glass wall between us now, invisible but impenetrable.

I finally produce, 'I got my matches,' while Hana blurts out, 'Why didn't you call me back?'

Both of us paused, startled, and then again started up at the same time. I say, 'You called?' and Hana says, 'Did you accept yet?'

'You first,' I say.

Hanna seems uncomfortable. She looks at the sky, at a small child standing across the street in a baggy swimsuit, at the two men loading buckets of something into a truck down the street- everywhere but at me. 'I left you, like, three messages.'

'I never got any messages,' I say quickly, my heart speeding up. For weeks I have been pissed that Hana did not try to reach out to me after the party- pissed and hurt. But I told myself it was better this way.

I told myself Hana had changed, and she would not have much to say to me anymore.

Hana is looking at me like she is trying to judge whether I am telling the truth.

'Carol didn't tell you that I called?'

'No, I swear.' 'Um so relieved I laugh.

In that second, it hits me just how much I have missed Hana. Even when she is mad at me, she is the only person who is ever really looked out for me by choice, not because of family obligation, duty, and responsibility and all the other stuff that...

Everyone else in my life- mom and all my cousins, the other girls at St. Anne's, even Rachel- like- have only spent time with me because they had to.

'I had no idea.' Hanna does not laugh, though. She frowns. 'No worries. It is no grandiose thing to me.'

'Listen, Hanna-'

She cut me off. 'As I said, it's no big deal.' She crosses her arms and shrugs. I do not know whether she believes me or not, but things are different. This is not going to be some big, happy reunion.

'So, you got matched?'

Her voice is polite now, and slightly formal, so I take on the same tone.

'Brian Scharff. I accepted. You?' She nods... A muscle flexes at the corner of her mouth, almost imperceptible.

Me- her- them- 'Hargrove?' 'Wow. Congratulations.' I cannot help sounding impressed. Hanna must have killed at the evaluations. Not that that is any surprise.

‘Yeah. Lucky me.’ Hanna’s voice is completely toneless. I cannot tell if she is being sarcastic. Nevertheless, she is lucky, whether she knows it or not.

And there it is: Even though we are standing in the same patch of sun-drenched pavement, we might as well be a hundred thousand miles apart. You came from different stars, and you will come to different ends: That is an old saying, something she used to repeat a lot. I never really understood how true it was until now.

This must be why Carol did not tell me Hana called. Three phone calls are a lot of phone calls to forget, and Carol is careful about stuff like that. She was trying to hurry up the inevitable, skip us both to the ending, the part where Hanna and I are not friends anymore.

She knows that after the procedure-once the past and all our shared history have loosened their grip on us, once we do not feel our memories so much, we will not have anything in common anymore.

Hanna- Kellie was trying to protect me, in her way.

There is no point in confronting her about it. Feelings are not forever. Time waits for no man, but progress waits for man to enact it. ‘You are walking home, right?’ Hana is still looking at me like I am a stranger. ‘Yeah,’ I say. I gesture to my T-shirt.

‘I figured I should probably get inside before I blind someone with this.’ A flit over Hana’s face. ‘I’ll walk with you,’ she says, which surprises me. For a while, we walked in silence.

We are not that far from my house, and I am worried we will go the whole way back without speaking at all. I have never seen Hana so quiet, and it is making me nervous. ‘Where are you coming from?’ I say, just to say something. Hana starts next to me, as though I have woken her from a dream.

‘East End,’ she says. ‘I’m on a strict tanning schedule.’ She presses her arm next to mine. It is at least seven shades darker than mine, which is still pale, and a little more freckled than it is in the winter. ‘Not you, huh?’ This time she smiles for real.

‘Um, no. Have not gotten down to the beach very much.’ I will away blush. Thankfully, Hana does not notice, or if she does, she does not say anything. ‘I know. I was looking for you.’

‘You where?’ I gave her a look from the corner of my eye.

She rolls her eyes at me. I am glad to see her attitude is coming back operational. 'I mean, not enthusiastically. But I have been down there a few times, yes. Have not seen you- enough.'

'I've been working a lot,' I say. I do not add, to avoid East End.

'You still running?'

'No. Too hot.' 'Yeah, me too. Figured I would give it a rest until fall.' We walk a few more paces in silence and then Hana squints at me, tilting her head. 'So, what else?' Her question catches me off guard.

'What do you mean, what else?'

'That is what I mean. I mean, what else? Come on, Lena. It is the last summer, remember? The last summer of no responsibilities and all that good stuff. So, what have you been doing?'

'Where have you been?'

'I- nothing... I have not done anything.'

This was the whole point-to stay out of trouble, to do as little as possible but saying the words makes me feel sad. The summer is ending so-o rapidly, shrinking down to a fine point before I have even had a chance to enjoy it. It is already August.

We will have another five weeks of this weather before the wind starts cutting in at night and the leaves get trimmed with edges of gold. 'What about you?' I say... 'Good summer so far?'

'Why? It is not like you will even have a budget.' I do not mean to sound bitter but there it is, the difference in our futures cutting between us again. We go silent after that. Hanna looks away, squinting slightly at the sunlight.

Part: 3

I am just feeling depressed about how quickly the summer is cycling by, but memories start coming thick and fast, like a deck of cards being reshuffled in my head: Hana swinging open the bathroom door that first day in second grade, folding her arms as she blurted out, Is it because of your mom?

Staying up past midnight was one of the few times we were ever allowed to have a sleepover, giggling, and imagining amazing and impossible people for our matches someday, like the president of the United States or the

stars of our favorite movies; running side by side, legs beating in tandem on the pavement, like the rhythm of a single heartbeat; bodysurfing at the beach and buying triple cones of ice cream on the way home, arguing about whether vanilla or chocolate was better.

‘The usual.’

Hana shrugs... ‘I have been going to the beach a lot as I said. Been babysitting for the Farrels some.’

‘Really?’ I wrinkle my nose. Hana’s always had a thing against children.

She is always staying they are too sticky and clingy, like Kellie that has been left too long in a hot pocket.

She makes a face. ‘Yeah, unfortunately. My parents decided I needed to ‘practice managing a household,’ or some crap like that. Do you know they are making me work out a budget? Like figuring out how to spend sixty dollars a week is going to teach me about paying bills, or responsibility or something.’

Best friends, for more than ten years, and in the end, it all comes down to the edge of a scalpel, the motion of a laser beam through the brain, and a flashing surgical knife. All that history and its importance gets detached and floats away like a severed balloon. In two years, in two months- Hanna and I will pass each other on the streets with nothing more than a nod-different people, different worlds, two stars revolving silently, separated by thousands of miles of dark space.

Segregation has it all wrong. We should be protected from the people who will leave us in the end, from all the people who will disappear or forget us.

Hanna’s feeling nostalgic too because she suddenly comes out with, ‘Remember all our plans for this summer? All the things we said we would finally do?’

I do not even skip a beat. ‘Break into the Spencer Prep pool-’

‘-and go swimming in our underwear,’ I- Hanna finishes. I cracked a smile. ‘Hop the fence at Cherryville Farms-’ ‘-and eat the maple syrup straight out of the barrels.’

‘Run from the Hill to the old airport.’

‘Ride our bikes down Suicide Point.’

‘Try and find that rope swing Sarah Miller told us about. The one above Fore River.’

‘Sneak into the movie theater and see four movies back-to-back.’

‘Finish off the Pixey Sundae at Maeie’s.’ I am fully smiling now, and Hanna is too. I start quoting, “A huge sundae for enormous appetites only, featuring thirteen scoops, whipped cream, hot fudge–” Hanna jumps in, “And all the toppings your little monsters can handle!”

Both of us laughed. We have read that sign a thousand times. We have been debating making a second attack on the Hobgoblin since fourth grade: That is when we tried the first time. Hanna insisted on going there for her birthday and took me along. Both of us spent the rest of the night rolling around on the floor of her bathroom, and we had only made it through seven of the thirteen scoops.

Part: 4

Hanna- We have reached my street. A few kids are playing in the middle of the road. It is a makeshift game of soccer: They are kicking a can around and shouting, bodies brown and shiny with sweat. I see Kellie among them. As I am watching, a girl tries to elbow her out of the way, and she turns around and pushes her to the ground.

The younger girl starts to wail. No one comes out of any of the houses, even as the girl’s voice crescendos to a high-pitched scream, like a siren going off. A curtain or a dish towel flutter in a window: Other than that, the street is silent and motionless.

Kellie- I am desperate to keep riding the wave of good feeling, to fix things between Hana and me, even if it is only for a month. ‘Listen, Hanna’-I feel like I am working the words past a massive lump in my throat; I am as nervous as I was before the evaluations- ‘they are playing The Defective Detective in the park tonight. Double feature, with her. We could go if you want.’ The Defective Detective is this film franchise Hanna and I used to love when we were little, about a famous detective who is incompetent, and his dog sidekick: The dog always ends up solving the crimes.

A lot of actors played the lead role, but our favorite was her.

Hanna- When we were kids, we used to pray to get matched with him and her.

Kellie- 'Tonight?' Hana's smile falters, and my stomach sinks. Stupid, stupid, I think.

It does not matter anyway.

'It is okay if you cannot. No worries.

'Just an idea,' I say quickly, looking away so she will not see how disappointed I am.

'No-I mean, I want to, but-' Hana sucks in a breath. I hate this, hate how awkward we both are. 'I kind of have this party'-she corrects herself speedily-'this thing I am supposed to go to with her.

My stomach gets that hollowed out feeling. It is amazing how words can do that, just shred your insides apart. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me- such bullshit.

'Since when do you spend time together with her?'

Again, I am not trying to sound bitter, but I realize I sound like someone's whiny little sister, complaining about being left out of a game. I bite my lip and turn away, furious with myself.

'She's not that bad.'

Part: 5

Kellie- Hanna says mildly. I can hear it in her voice; she feels sorry for me. This is worse than anything. I almost wish we were screaming at each other again like we did the day at her house-even that would be better than her careful tone of voice, the way we are dancing around each other's feelings. 'She is not stuck-up. Just shy, I guess.'

Angelica Marston was a junior last year. Hana made fun of her for the way she wore her uniform. It was always perfectly pressed and spotless, the collar of her button-down turned down exactly, her skirt hitting exactly at the knee.

Hana said Angelica Marston had a stick up her butt because her father was a big scientist at the labs. And she did walk that way, all constipated and careful.

'You used to hate her,' I squeak out.

My words do not seem to be asking my brain for permission before popping out of my mouth.

'I didn't hate her,' Hana says like she is trying to explain algebra to a two-year-old. 'I did not know her. I always thought she was a bitch; you know?'

'Because of her clothes. But that is all her parents. They are super strict, protective.' Hana shakes her head. 'She is not like that at all. She is- well different...'

That word seems to vibrate in the air for a second: different. For a second, I have an image of Hanna and Kellie, arms linked, trying not to laugh, sneaking through the streets after curfew: Angelica was fearless, beautiful, and fun, just like Hana. I push the image out of my head.

Down the street, one of the kids kicks the can, hard. It skitters between two dented grey garbage cans, that have been set out in the road, a makeshift goal. Half of the children start jumping up and down, pumping their fists; the others, Jenny included, gesticulate and shriek something about off-sides.

It occurs to me for the first time how ugly my street must look to Hana, all the houses squished together, half of them missing windowpanes, porches sagging in the middle like old beaten-down mattresses.

It is so different from the clean, quiet streets in West End, from the silent, gleaming cars and the gates and the green hedges.

'You could come tonight,' Hanna says quietly.

A rush of hatred overwhelms me. Hatred for my life, for its narrowness and cramped spaces; hatred for Kellie, with her secretive smile and rich parents; hatred for Hanna, for being so stupid, careless, and stubborn, primarily, and for leaving me behind before, I was ready to be left; and underneath all those layers else, too, some white-hot blade of unhappiness flashing in the very deepest part of me. I cannot name it or even focus on it clearly, but somehow, I understand that this- that other thing-makes me the angriest of all.

'Thanks for the invitation,' I say, not even bothering to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. 'Sounds like a blast. Will there be boys there too?'

Either Hanna does not notice the tone of my voice-which is doubtful-or she chooses to ignore it. 'That's kind of the whole point,' she says, deadpan. 'Well, and the music.'

‘Music?’ I speak. I cannot help but sound interested. ‘Like the last time?’ Hana’s face lights up. ‘Yeah. I mean, no. Different band. But these guys are supposed to be amazing—even better than last time.’ She pauses, then repeats quietly, ‘You could come with us.’

Despite everything, this gives me pause. In the days after the party at Roaring Brook Farms, snatches of music followed me everywhere: I heard it winging in and out of the wind, I heard it singing off the ocean and moaning through the walls of the house.

Sometimes, I woke up in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat, my heart pounding, with the notes sounding in my ears. But every time I was awake and trying to remember the melodies consciously, hum a few notes or recall any of the chords, I could not.

Hanna’s staring at me hopefully, waiting for my response. For a second, I felt bad for her. I want to make her happy, like I always did, want to see her give a whoop and put her fist in the air, and flash me one of her well-known smiles.

But then I remember she has Kellie now, and something hardens in my throat, and the significance that I am going to disappoint her gives me dull satisfaction.

‘I think I’ll pass,’ I say. ‘But thanks anyway.’

Hana shrugs, and I can tell she is fighting to look like it is no big deal. ‘If you change your mind—’ She tries to smile but cannot keep it up for longer than a second. Deering Highlands... You know where to find me.’ Deering Highlands.

Of course...

The Highlands is an abandoned subdivision off-peninsula. A decade ago, the government discovered sympathizers— and, if the rumors are true, even some Invalids— living together in one of the big mansions out there. It was a huge scandal, and the bust was the result of a yearlong sting operation.

When all was said and done, forty-two people had been executed and another hundred thrown in the Vaults. Since then, Deering Highlands has been a ghost town: avoided, forgotten, and condemned.

‘Yeah, well. You know where to find me.’ I gesture lamely down the street.

‘Yeah.’ Hanna looks down at her feet and hops from one to the other. There is nothing else to say, but I cannot stand to turn around, and just walk away. I have a terrible feeling this is the last time I will see Hanna before we are cured.

Part: 6

Fear-

seizes me all at once, and I wish I could backpedal through our conversation, take back all the sarcastic or mean things that I said, tell her I miss her, and I want to be best friends again.

But just when I am about to blurt this out, she gives me a quick wave and says, ‘Okay, then. See you around,’ and the moment collapses in on itself and with it, my chance to speak.

‘Okay. See you.’

Hanna starts down the road. I am tempted to watch her go. I get the urge to memorize her walk-to imprint her in my brain somehow, just as she is but as I am watching her waver in and out of the fierce sunlight, her silhouette gets confused with another one in my head, a shadow weaving in and out of darkness, about to walk off the cliff, and I do not know whom I am looking at anymore.

Suddenly the edges of the world are blurring and there is a sharp pain in my throat, so I turn around and walk quickly toward the house.

‘Liv!’ She calls out to me, just before I reach the gate.

I spin around, heart leaping, thinking she will be the one to say it. I miss you. Let us go back.

In the years before the cure was perfected, it was offered on a trial basis only. The risks attached to it were great. At the time one out of every hundred patients suffered a fatal loss of brain function after the procedure.

Unfluctuating from fifty feet, I can see Hanna hesitating. Then she makes this fluttering gesture with her hand and calls out, ‘Never- mind.’ This time when she turns around, she does not waver. She walks straight and speedily, turns a corner, and is gone.

But what did I expect?

That is the whole point, after all:

There is no going back.

And if there were people who died on the operating table, they died for a compelling cause, and no one can lament them- Nonetheless, people swarmed the hospitals in record numbers, demanding to be cured; they camped outside the laboratories for days at a time, hoping to secure a procedural slot.

These years are also known as the Miracle Years of the number of lives that were healed and made whole, and the number of souls brought out of sickness.

Part: 7

Hanna- Her face is red, and she is sweating big-time. Dark swaths of sweat have left pit stains on her pale blue blouse, and navy crescents.

‘Better get changed,’ she says.

‘Rachel and Deved will be here any second.’

‘She’s grown up now,’ she told me when I asked her... why? Why Rachel- did not like to play anymore. ‘Someday you’ll see.’ After that, I stopped paying attention to the notation that appeared every few months on the kitchen wall calendar: ER to visit. At dinner, the big topics of conversation are Brian Scharff- Rachel’s husband, David, works with Brian’s cousin’s friend, so David feels like he is an expert on the family-and Moon of Pittsburgh, where I will be starting in the fall. It is the first time in my life I will be in class with members of the opposite sex, but Rachel tells me not to worry.

I would completely have forgotten my sister, and her husband, were coming over for dinner. Normally- I see Rachel four or five times a year, tops. When I was younger, especially after Rachel had first moved out of her house, I used to count the days until she would see me.

I do not think I fully understood then about the procedure and what it meant for her- for me- for us. I knew that she had been saved from Thomas and the disease, but that was it. I thought that otherwise, things would be the same.

I thought that as soon as she came to see me it would be like old times again, that we would bust out our socks to have a dance party, or she would pull me onto her lap and start braiding my hair, launch into one of her stories of distant places and witches who could change into animals.

But then again, she only skimmed a hand over my head as she came through the door and applauded politely when Carol made me recite my multiplication and division tables.

'You won't even notice,' she says.

'You'll be so busy with work and study.'

'There are safeguards,' says she. 'All the students are vetted.'

Code for: All the students are cured.

I think of Kellie and almost say, not all of them.

Dinner drags on well past curfew. By the time my aunt helps me clear the plates, it is eleven o'clock, and still, Rachel and her husband show no sign of leaving. That is another thing I am excited about: In thirty-six days, I do not like-must worry about curfew anymore.

After dinner, my uncle and David went out onto the porch. She has brought two cigars- cheap ones, but still- and the smell of the smoke, sweet and spicy and just a little bit oily- float in through the windows, intermingles with the sound of their voices, and fills the house with a blue-like haze.

Rachel and Hanna stay in the dining room, drinking cups of watered-down boiled coffee, the dirty pale color of old dishwater.

From upstairs, I hear scampering feet. Kellie will tease her until she is bored, until she climbs into bed, sour and dissatisfied, letting the dullness and sameness of another day lull her to sleep.

I wash the dishes-many more of them than usual since Carol insisted on having a soup (hot carrot, which we all choked down, sweating) and a pot roast slathered in garlic and limp asparagus, rescued from the very bottom of the vegetable bin, and some stale cookies.

Part: 8

I am full, and the warmth of the dishwater on my wrists and elbows- plus the familiar rhythms of conversation, the pitter-patter of feet upstairs, the heavy blue smoke-make me feel very sleepy. Kellie has finally remembered to ask about Rachel's children; Rachel goes over their accomplishments as though reciting a list she has only memorized recently, and with difficulty- Sara is reading already; Hanna said her first word at only thirteen months, to Rachel now part of Ray's freak body party.

'Raid, raid... this is a raid. Please do as you are commanded and do not try and resist.'

The voice booming from outside makes me jump. Rachel and Hanna paused momentarily in their conversation, listening to the commotion in the street. I cannot hear David and Uncle, either. Even this girl and she have stopped fooling around upstairs.

There is no more knocking on the walls and girls sighing. Patchy interference from the street; the sounds of hundreds and hundreds of boots, clicking away in time; and that awful voice, amplified by a bullhorn: 'This is a raid. Attention, this is a raid. Please be ready with your identification papers.'

A raid night. Instantly I think of Hanna and the party. The room starts spinning. I reached out, grabbing onto the counter.

'Seems pretty early for a raid,' she says mildly from the dining room. 'We had one just a few months ago, I think.'

'February seventeenth,' Rachel says...'

I remember...

Our lips are so wet-

Chapter: 4

Rachel

Part: 1

Rachel- We stood in the snow for half an hour before we could be verified. Afterward, Hanna had pneumonia for two weeks.' She relates this story as though she is chatting about some minor inconvenience at the Laundromat like she is erroneous a sock.

My name is Rachel Anderson, my gram would be Lily.

'Has it been that long?' Hanna shrugs and takes a sip of her coffee.

The voices, the feet, the static-it is all coming closer. The raiding parties move as one, from house to house- sometimes hitting every house on a street, sometimes skipping whole blocks, sometimes going every other. It is random. Or at least, it is supposed to be random. The houses always get targeted more than others.

But even if you are not on a watch list you can end up standing in the snow, like Rachel and her husband, while the regulators and police try to prove your rationality. Otherwise- even worse- while the raiders come inside your house, tear the walls down, and look for signs of suspicious activity. Isolated property laws are suspended on raid nights. Every law is adjourned on raid nights.

We've all heard horror stories: pregnant women stripped down and probed in front of everybody, people thrown in jail for two or three years just for looking at a police officer incorrectly, or for trying to prevent a supervisor from entering a certain room.

Part: 2

'This is a raid. If you are asked to step out of the house, please make sure you have all your identification papers in hand, including the papers of any children over the age of six months.

Anyone who resists will be detained and questioned. Anyone who delays will be charged with obstruction.'

At the end of the street. Then a few houses away. Then two houses away. No, the next door is over. I hear the Rake's mother freaking dog start barking furiously.

Then Mrs. Cumshot, apologized, yet not enough.

More barking-then someone (a regulator?) mutters something, and I hear a few heavy thuds and a whimper, then someone else saying, 'You don't have to kill the damn thing,' and someone else saying, 'Why not? Probably has fleas, anyway.'

Then for a while, there is quiet: just the occasional crackle of walkie-talkies, someone reciting identification numbers into a phone, and the shuffling of papers.

Then: 'All right, then. You are in the clear.' And the boots start up again.

For all their nonchalance, even Rachel and I tense up as the boots climb by our house. I can see Hanna gripping her coffee cup tightly, knuckles white. My heart is jumping and skipping, a grasshopper in my chest. But the boots pass us by.

~*~

Rachel heaves out a perceptible sigh of relief as we hear the regulators pound on a door farther down the street. 'Open up... this is a raid.'

I have a- teacup rattles in its saucer, making me jump. 'Silly, isn't it?' she says, forcing a laugh. 'Even when you haven't done anything wrong, it still makes you jumpy.' Jenny is my banished angel, and I need to have faith within, she makes me come for her.

I feel a dull pain in my hand and realize I am still holding on to the counter as though it is going to save my life. I cannot relax, cannot calm down, even as the sounds of the footsteps grow fainter, the bullhorn voice increasingly distorted until it is completely unintelligible.

All I can picture are the raiding parties- sometimes as many as fifty in a single night-swirling around Pitt., swarming it, surrounding it like water cascading around a whirlpool, sweeping up anyone and everyone they can find and accused of misbehavior or disobedience, and even people they cannot.

Somewhere out there Hanna is dancing, spinning, blond hair fanning out behind her, smiling while around her boys are pressing close, and unapproved music pumps through the speakers.

I fight a feeling of incredible nausea. I do not even want to think about what will happen to her to all of them if they are caught.

All I can do is hope she has not made it to the party yet. She took too long to get ready-it seems possible, Hana was always late and was still at home when the raids started. Even Hanna would never venture outside during raids. It is suicide.

But I and everyone else - Every single person there - Everyone who just wanted to hear some music - I think about what Hanna said the night I ran into him at Brooke Farms: I came to hear the music, like everybody else.

I will take the image out of my mind and tell myself it is not my problem. I should be happy if the party is raided and everyone there is in trouble. What they are doing is dangerous, not just for them but for all of us: That is how the disease gets in. But the beneath part of me, the stubborn part that said gray at my first evaluation, keeps tenacious and nagging at me. So, what? It speaks.

So, they wanted to hear some music. Some real music- not the dinky little songs that get trotted out at the Pitt Concert Series, all boring rhythms, and bright, chipper notes.

They are not doing anything that bad.

Then I remember the other thing Hanna said: Nobody's hurting anybody.

Besides, there is always the possibility that Hanna did not run late tonight, and she is out there, oblivious, as the raids circle closer and closer.

I- Rachel, must squeeze my eyes shut against the thought and the thought of lots of glittering blades descending on her. If she is not thrown in jail, she will be carted directly to the labs-she will be cured before dawn, regardless of the dangers or risks.

Somehow, despite my racing thoughts and the circumstance that the room continues its frantic spinning, I have been able to clean all the dishes. I have also come to a decision.

I must go. I must warn her.

I must warn all of them.

By the time Rachel and I leave and all and sundry are settled in bed it is midnight.

Every second that passes feels like agony. I can only hope the door-to-door on the peninsula is taking longer than usual, and it will be a while before the raiders make it to the Laurel Highlands. They have decided to skip the Highlands altogether. Given the fact that many of the houses up there are vacant, it is always a possibility. Still, since the Highlands used to be the hotbed of resistance in Pitt., it seems doubtful.

I slip out of bed, not bothering to change out of my sleep pants and T-shirt, both of which are black. Then I put on black flats, and even though it is about a thousand degrees, pull a black ski hat out of the closet. I cannot be too careful tonight.

Just as I am about to crack open the bedroom door, I hear a small noise behind me, like the mewing of a cat. I whip around. She is sitting up in bed, watching me, all naked dancing for her.

Do you like what you see? Yes, suck on me!

Okay and she did. I reached a successful conclusion!

~*~

Hanna- tips for eating a girl like Kellie or Rachel.

Hanna- Aha! You are in luck, my friend. I will tell you how to perform the best oral sex. She will come in less than two minutes if you do this right.

First, there is the normal way to do it as described by my friends here. Teasing, lacking, introducing your tongue. All that is great, she will love that, but she will love this even more.

STARTING-

Well, you must start the normal way, as described above. Go down there and lick the clitoris. (If you do not know where or what the clitoris is, I recommend you look it up on google and look at several pictures.)

Also, another tip for regular oral sex is that you get your mouth closed like you are French kissing it, not like in porn where they just use the flapping tongue at a distance. They do that, so you can see her business.

GETTING DOWN TO IT-

Ok, now, after 2 or 3 minutes of regular oral sex, this is what you are going to do. tighten your cheeks and lips and blow (note that if you do not tighten, the effect will be a motorboat, you do not want that,) this will make your lips vibrate fast. Practice this by yourself first, then apply that to her clit and she will love it. I could not find any videos of grownups doing this, but babies do it all the time, here is a video of a baby doing something like what I explained.

First off, do whatever you can to get her turned on. Every girl is different, try making out, humping her, sexually removing her clothes, taking off your clothes to get hot and wet, whatever it takes. If her clothes are not removed, take them off. Do not have light in the room. Try to have it as dark as possible because it will relax the girl more.

Do not finger her right away, just place your hand or fingers on her pussy and rub it and play around with it, do this with her laying down and you sitting up. Look at her to see her response. Then you can start to finger her, start slowing with one finger, then add the second one, or third or fourth... however many you can. The more fingers, the better it feels.

Then go faster and faster. Get her moaning and sighing. THEN: PUT AS MANY FINGERS AS POSSIBLE IN AS FAR AS THEY WILL GO! AND PUT YOUR THUMB ON THE TOP OF HER PUSSY AND MASSAGE IT.

THAT WILL DRIVE HER WILD. GET HER TURNED ON.

If she has no clothing on, take the come from your fingers and massage her boobs, and spread it all over her stomach while she relaxes. If you want, stick your fingers in her mouth so she will lick them or suck them clean. Then, get down and start eating her out. Start by licking the outside of it and then use your fingers to open it up and get your tongue in as far as you can. Move it around fast, if she comes, lick it up. Ignore the smell, of course, it is not going to be good, ignore it though, just think about how good you are making her feel.

Kellie- TIPS:

Make sure you get enough air before you start doing this. Let the air go steadily but slowly so you can last longer in one breath.

While you get more air, suck in so down on her.

Do not blow air into her vagina, do this at the clitoris.

When you practice this by yourself, it will be and sound different than when you do it. When you perform this on her, there will be a bunch of fluids and saliva flying everywhere because of the blowing and it will sound like you are blowing on her tummy, which may sound funny and silly... but believe you-me, if she starts laughing, she will not laugh for more than three seconds, then her face will change to that of a pleasured woman.

1. What does that smell of nothing if she is clean about it? It tests like skin, so yes. While some folks prefer their poontang to be on the gamey side, for many people, fear of a funky odor or taste is the chief barrier to going down on a woman. All women do have a distinctive scent and flavor, and for some would-be cunning linguists, these may be an acquired taste.

2. However, if your partner is clean and in good health, her taste and smell should not be unpleasant or overwhelming. If you have concerns about her hygiene, the most tactful approach is to suggest a shared shower or bath before sex. If after a good soaping, her pussy still smells like something crawled up it and died, or she has an unusual discharge, she has an infection and should see a doctor.

3. Work your way up.

Take your time when you start to eat pussy. Get her warmed up with some basic foreplay- kissing, fondling, etc. It is better to go down on a wet pussy than a dry one.

Once she is aroused, make your descent. Try kissing and tonguing her ankle or the sole of her foot. Then kiss and lick your way slowly up the inside of her leg (the back of the knee is a good erogenous zone, too). Tease her a bit more by kissing and tonguing her inner thighs. Blow some air lightly over her clit and open it. She will go nuts.

4. Get acquainted.

Once your face is up in her crotch, do not dive straight for her panic button. Explore the whole area with your mouth. Gently probe with your tongue and locate her vagina and clit. Suck on her labia. Get your whole face messy.

5. Get busy.

Now you want to go to work on her clit. The key is to use your tongue and lips to suck and massage it gently. Do not poke at it or press it too hard. Go in circles, go up and down, flick back and forth lightly. There is no real 'right' way to go down on a woman; just make it up as you go along and pay attention to what works. Vary your speed and pressure and see what she responds to.

When you hit the right groove, you will know it because she will grab the back of your head and clamp her thighs around your ears like a vice. But to be on the safe side, ask her beforehand to let you know what she likes. Once you hit her hot spot, there is no need to rush; just keep her engine revving. Feel free to explore some other techniques or positions before you take her over the top.

Rachel- TIPS

1. ABCs.

This is the most common tip when you eat pussy: use your tongue to trace the letters of the alphabet on her clit. Some people swear by it. I do not recommend it. I do not think it is a good technique. Also, it is too much of a distraction, and if she catches you humming the Alphabet Song under your breath, you are in trouble. You should be paying attention to her, not what comes after Q.

2. Use your hands.

You can create some wild sensations for her by stimulating her clit with both your fingers and your tongue simultaneously. Also, most women enjoy a finger or two in their PUSSY while being eaten out. Insert your fingers with your palm up, crook them slightly, and stroke toward you in a 'come hither' motion

to hit her G-spot. A finger up the CLIT will also drive her over the edge if she is into anal play. (As always, to avoid infection, if you put something in her ASS, make sure you do not put it in her pussy or mouth afterward.) You can if she wants but asks.

3. Stick out your tongue.

You can also use your tongue to penetrate her- just make it rigid and plunge in. You can then tongue- CLIT, and PUSSY and kiss her by moving your tongue in and out, or by keeping it stationary and bobbing your whole head. For bonus points, try stimulating her clit with your nose while your tongue is inside her.

4. Let her ride.

Put a pillow or two under your neck and let her sit on your face. This gives you a pleasant view of her PUSSY and junk and gives her a degree of control over pressure and position. Let her grind her juices all over your mug.

Um...

Part: 3

#- Lez-bo's! Maddie and Olivia

Rachel- Boys' balls are hairy- and gross not tasty at all to me.

For a second, we just stared at each other. If Kellie makes a noise, or gets out of bed, or does anything, she is bound to wake Hanna, and then I am done making a baby, finished, kaput. I am trying to think of what I can say to reassure her, trying to fabricate a lie, but then, the miracle of miracles, she just lies back down in bed and closes her eyes. And even though it is very dark, I would swear that there is the smallest smile on her face.

I feel a quick rush of relief. One good thing about the fact is that Gracie refuses to speak. I know she will not tell me. I slip out into the street without any other problems, even remembering to skip the third-to-last stair, which last time let out such an awful squeak, I thought for sure Hanna and the teenage girls wake up all in the same bad.

Lying side by side ass naked.

After the noise and the commotion of the raids, the street is freakily still and quiet. Every single window is dark, all the blinds were drawn like the houses

are trying to turn away from the street or put up their shoulders against prying eyes.

...

The Raiders have moved on.

I start quickly in the direction of the Highlands. I am too afraid to take my bike. I am worried the little reflective patch on the wheels will attract too much attention.

I cannot think about what I am doing, I cannot think about the consequences if I am caught. A stray piece of red paper sweeps by me, turning on the wind like the tumbleweed you see in old cowboy movies.

I recognize it as a raider's notice, a proclamation filled with impossible-to pronounce words explaining the legality of suspending everyone's rights for the evening. Other than that, it could be any other night-any other quiet, dead, ordinary night.

Excluding that on the wind, just faintly, you can hear the distant murmur of footsteps, and a high wail as if someone is crying. The sounds are so quiet you might almost mistake them for ocean and wind sounds.

I do not know where I even got this rush of resolution. I would never have thought I would have the courage to leave the house on a raid night, not in a million years.

Hanna was wrong about me. I am not scared all the time. I am passing a black trash bag heaped on the sidewalk when a low whimper stops me short. I spin around, my whole body on high alert in an instant. Nothing. The sound is repeated: an eerie, crooning sound that makes the hair on my arms stand up. Then the garbage bag by my feet shakes itself.

No. Not a garbage bag. It is Riley, the Next door' black yappy f*cking ass and a 2 by 4 in it- a mutt.

I take a few shaky steps toward him. I need only one glance to know that he is dying. He is completely coated with a sticky, shiny, black substance-blood, I realize as I get closer.

That is the reason I mistook his fur, in the dark, for the slick black surface of a plastic bag. One of his eyes is pressed to the pavement; the other is open. His head has been clubbed in.

Blood is flowing freely from his nose, black and viscous. I think of the voice I heard- has fleas, anyway, the regulator said- and the swift thudding sound that followed.

Hanna is staring at me with a look so mournful and accusatory I swear for a second it is like he is a human, and he is trying to tell me something trying to say, you did this to me. A wave of nausea overtakes me, and I am tempted to get down on my knees and scoop him up in my arms or strip off my clothes and start soaking the blood off him. But at the same time, I feel paralyzed. I cannot move.

As I am standing there, frozen, he gives a long, shuddering jerk, from the tip of his tail to his nose. Then he goes still. Instantly my arms and legs unfreeze.

Part: 4

I- Rachel stumbled backward, bile pushing itself up into my mouth. I career in a full circle, feeling like I did the day I got drunk with Hana, out of control of my own body. Anger and disgust are shredding through me, making me want to scream. I find a flattened cardboard box sitting behind a dumpster and drag it over to Kellie's body, covering her completely. I try not to think of the insects that will tear into him by morning. I am surprised to feel tears prick in my eyes. I wipe them away with the back of my arm. But as I start toward Deering all I can think is, I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, like a mantra, or a prayer.

One good thing about raids is: They are loud. All I must do is pause in the shadows and listen for the footsteps, the static, the freaking harsh voices. I switch directions and choose the side streets, the ones that have been skipped over or raided already. The people who live in these houses have been identified as troublemakers or resisters. The burning wind whistling through the streets carries sounds of yelling and crying, and dogs barking.

Kellie- I do my best not to think about

Hanna.

Part: 5

#- She was embarrassed when she did this for the first time- normal!

Rachel- Evidence of the raids is everywhere: overturned garbage cans and Dumpsters, trash picked through and spilled out onto the street, mountains

of old receipts and shredded letters and rotting vegetables and foul-smelling goop I do not even want to identify, red notices coating everything like a speck of dust. My shoes get slick from clomping over them, and in the worst places, I must keep my arms out like a tightrope walker just to stay on my feet. I pass a few houses marked with a big X, black paint splashed across their walls and windows like a black gash, and my stomach sinks.

I stick to the shadows, slipping in and out of alleys and darting from one Dumpster to the next. Sweat is pooling at the base of my neck and under my arms, and it is not just from the heat. Everything looks strange, grotesque, and distorted, certain streets glittering with glass from smashed windows, the smell of burning in the air. At one point, I come around a corner onto Forest Avenue just as a group of regulators turns onto it from the other end. I whip back around, pressing flat against the wall of a hardware store and inching back in the direction I have come.

The chances of any of the regulators seeing me are slim- I was a block away and it is pitch-black-but still, my heart never goes back to its normal pace. I feel like I am playing some giant video game or trying to solve a complicated math equation.

One girl is trying to avoid forty raiding parties of between fifteen to twenty people each, spread out across a radius of seven miles. If she must make it 2.8 miles through the center, what is the probability she will wake up tomorrow morning in a jail cell?

~*~

Before the shakedown, Deering

The Highlands were a nicer part of Pittsburgh.

The houses were big and new-at least For Hanna, which means they were built within the past hundred years and set back behind gates and hedges, on streets with names like Kellie and the other girl.

Road... There are a few families still clinging on in some of the houses, dirt-poor ones who cannot afford to move anywhere else, or have not gotten permission for a new residence, but it is empty. Nobody wanted to stay on; nobody wanted to be associated with the resistance.

The weirdest thing about Deering Highlands is how quickly it was abandoned. There are still rusting toys scattered among the grass and cars

parked in some of the driveways, though most of them have been picked apart, cleaned of metal, and malleable like corpses scavenged by enormous buzzards.

The whole area has the forlorn look of an abandoned animal: houses drooping slowly into the overgrown lawns.

Normally, I get freaked out just being in the vicinity of the Highlands. A lot of people say it is bad luck, like passing a graveyard without holding your breath.

But tonight, when I finally make it there, I feel like I could dance a jig on the sidewalk. Everything is dark, quiet, and undisturbed, not a single raider's notice to be seen, not a whisper of conversation or the brush of a heel on a sidewalk. The Raiders have not come yet.

They will not come at all. I speed quickly through the streets, picking up the pace now that I do not have to worry so much about sticking to the shadows and moving soundlessly. Highlands are big, a maze of winding streets that all look weirdly similar, houses looming out of the darkness like ships running aground. The lawns have all gone wild over the years, trees stretching their gnarled branches to the sky and casting crazy zigzag shadows on the moonlit pavement.

I get lost in Hanna- ah- way-somehow, I manage to make a complete circle and wind up hitting the same intersection twice-but when I turn onto a jumble desolate lane, I see a dull light burning dimly in the distance, behind a knotted mass of trees, and I know I have found the place.

An old mailbox is staked crookedly in the ground next to the driveway. A black X is still faintly visible on one of its sides.

Part: 6

I can see why they chose this house for the party. It is set back far from the road and surrounded by trees so dense I cannot help but think of the dark and whispering woods on the far side of the border. Walking up the driveway is creepy. I keep my eyes focused on the fuzzy pale light of the house, which expands and brightens slowly as I get closer, eventually resolving into two lit windows.

The windows have been covered with fabric, to hide the fact that there are people inside. It is not working. I can see shadow people moving back and forth inside the house. The music is incredibly quiet. It is not until I make it onto

the porch that I hear it at all-faint, muffled strains that seem to vibrate up from the floorboards. There must be a basement.

I have been rushing to arrive, but I hesitate with my hand on the front door, my palm slick with sweat. I have not given much thought to how I will get everyone out. If I just start screaming about a raid it will cause panic. Everyone will stream into the streets at once, and then the chances of getting home undetected go to zero. Someone will hear something; the raiders will catch on, and then we will all be screwed.

I do mental corrections. They will be screwed. I am not like these people on the other side of the door. I am not them. But then I think of Hanna trembling, going limp. I am not those people either, the ones who did that, the ones who watched. Even the next door over did not bother trying to save him, their dog.

They did not even cover him up as he was dying.

I would never do that. Never - ever. Not even if I had a million procedures. He was alive. He had a heartbeat and blood and breath, and they left him there like trash.

Me- Us- We- Them- and They. The words ricochet in my head. I rub my palm and my hands on the back of my pants and open the door.

~*~

Rachel- said this party would be smaller, but to me, it seems even more crowded than the last one, maybe because the rooms are tiny and packed.

They are filled with a choking curtain of cigarette smoke, which shimmers over everything and makes it look as though everyone is swimming underwater. It is deathly hot in here, at least ten degrees hotter than it was outside people move slowly and have rolled up their shirt sleeves above the shoulders, tugged their jeans to their knees, and wherever there is skin, there is a glistening sheen on it. For a moment I can only stand there and watch. I wish I had a camera. If I ignore the fact that there are hands touching hands and bodies bumping together and a thousand things that are terrible and wrong, I can see that it is beautiful.

Part: 7

#- Nice- butt-hole Liv! Ha- crackhead!

Then I realize I am wasting time.

A girl is standing directly in front of me, blocking my way. She has her back to me. I reached out and put a hand on her arm. Her skin is so hot it burns. She turns to me, face red and flushed, craning her head backward to hear.

‘It’s a raid night,’ I say to her, surprised that my voice comes out so steady.

The music is soft, but insistent-it is coming up from a basement of some kind-not as crazy as the last time but just as strange and just as gorgeous. It reminds me of warm, dripping things, honey, sunlight, and red leaves swirling down on the wind. But the layers of conversation, the creaking of footsteps and floorboards, make it difficult to hear.

‘What?’ She sweeps her hair away from her ear.

I open my mouth to say raid but instead of my voice it is someone else’s that, comes out: an enormous, mechanical voice bellowing from outside, a voice that seems to shake and rattle from all sides at once, a voice that cuts through the warmth and the music like a cold razor edge through the skin.

At the same time, the room starts spinning, a swirling mass of red and white lights revolving over terrified, stunned faces.

‘Attention. This is a raid. Do not try to run. Do not try to resist. This is a raid.’

A few seconds later, the door explodes inward and a spotlight as bright as the sun turns everything white and motionless, turning everything to dust and statue.

Then they let the dogs loose. Kellie- The worst part-the the part I have never- ever forgotten- was its panicked roaring: a horrible, incessant, enraged bellow that sounded somehow human.

That is what I think of as the raiders start flooding the house, pouring in through the shattered door, and battering the windows. That is what I think of like the music cuts off suddenly and instead, the air is full of barking and screaming and shattering glass, as hot hands push me from the front and the side, and I catch an elbow under my chin and another one in my ribs.

I remember the bear...

Human beings, in their natural state, are unpredictable, erratic, and unhappy. It is only once their animal instincts are controlled that they can be responsible, dependable, and content.

I once saw a news report about a brown bear, that had accidentally been punctured by its trainer at the Pittsburgh circus during routine training. I was young, but I will never forget the way the bear looked, a mammoth dark blob, tearing around its circle with a ridiculous red paper hat still flopping crazily from its head, ripping into whatever it could get its jaws around: paper streamers, folding chairs, balloons. Its trainer, too: The bear mauled him, and turned his face into hamburger meat.

Somehow, I have surged forward in the panicked crowd that is flowing and scrabbling toward the back of the house. Behind me, I hear dogs snapping their jaws and regulators swinging heavy clubs. Folks are screaming- so many people it sounds like a single voice.

A girl falls behind me, stumbling forward and reaching for me as one of the regulator's batons catches her on the back of the head with a sickening crack. Her fingers tighten momentarily on the cotton of my shirt, and I shake her off and keep running, pushing, squeezing forward. I have no time to be sorry and no time to be scared. I have no time to do anything but move, push, and go, cannot think of anything but escape, escape, escape.

The strange thing is that for a minute in the middle of all that noise and confusion, I see things super clearly, in slow motion, like I am watching a film from a distance: I see a guard dog leap over a guy to my left; I see his knees buckle as he topples forward with the barest, tiniest noise, like a breath or a sigh, a crescent of blood spattering up from his neck, where the dog's teeth tear into him.

A girl with flashing blond hair goes down under the raiders' clubs, and as I see the arc of her hair, for a second my heart goes still, and I think I have died; it is all over. Then she twists her head my way, shouting, as the regulators get her with pepper spray, and I see that she is not Rachel, and relief rushes through me, a wave.

More snapshots. A movie-only a movie. Not happening, could never really happen. A boy and a girl, fighting to make it into one of the side rooms, thinking there is an exit that way.

The door is too small to enter at once. He is wearing a blue shirt that reads Pittsburgh NAVAL SCHOOL OF THE ARTS, and she has long red hair, bright as a flame. Only five minutes ago they were talking and laughing together, standing so close that if one of them had even tipped forward accidentally they might have kissed.

Now they wrestle, but she is too small. She locks her teeth on his arm like a dog, like a wild thing; he roars, rages grab her by the shoulders, and slams her back against the wall, out of the way.

She stumbles, falls, slipping, trying to stand up; one of the raiders, an enormous man with the reddest face I have ever seen, reaches down, knots his fingers around her ponytail, and hauls her to her feet.

Naval Conservatory does not get away either. Two raiders follow him, and as I run by, I hear the thud of their clubs, the mangled sound of screaming.

They have gotten the place surrounded. And then the open back door rises in front of me- and beyond it- dark trees, the cool and whispering woods behind the house. If I can make it outside - if I can hide from the lights for long enough- animals, I think. We are animals. People are shoving, pulling, using one another as shields as the raiders keep gaining, surging forward, swinging at us, dogs at our heels, batons whirling so close to my head I can feel the air whooshing on my neck as the wood twirls, twirls near the back of my skull. I think of searing pain, I think of red.

The crowd is thinning around me as the raiders advance. One by one people are screaming next to me-crack! And dropping, getting wrestled to the ground by three, four, or five dogs. Screaming, screaming. Everyone was screaming.

Somehow, I have managed to avoid being caught, and I am still rocketing through the narrow, creaking hallways, passing a blur of rooms, a blur of publics and raiders, more lights, more devastating windows, and the sound of engines. I hear a dog barking behind me, and behind that, a raider's pounding footsteps, gaining, gaining, a sharp voice yelling, 'Halt!' and I suddenly realized- I am alone in the hallway. Fifteen more steps - then ten. If I can make it into the darkness-

Five feet from the door and sudden, shooting pain rips through my leg. The dog has gotten its jaws around my calf, and I turn and that is when I see him, the regulator with the massive red face, eyes glittering, smiling-oh, God, he

is smiling, he enjoys this club raised, ready to swing. I close my eyes, think of pain as big as the ocean, and think of a blood-red sea. Think of my mother.

Then I am being jerked to the side, and I hear a crack and a yelp, the regulator saying, 'Shit.' The fire in my leg stops and the weight of the dog falls off, and there is an arm around my waist and a voice in my ear-a voice so familiar at that moment it is like I have been waiting for it all along like I have been hearing it forever in my dreams-breathing out:

'This way.' Rachel keeps one arm around my waist, half carrying me. We are in a different hallway now, this one smaller and empty. Every time I put weight on my right leg the pain flares up again, searing into my head. The raider is still behind us and pissed Hanna must have pulled me to safety at just the right second, so the raider cracked down on his dog instead of my skull and I know I must be slowing Kellie down, but he does not let me go, not for a second.

'In here,' she says, and then we are ducking into another room. We must be in a part of the house that was not being used for the party. This room is pitch-black, although Rachel does not slow down at all, just keeps going through the dark. I let the heaviness of his fingertips guide me left, right, left, right. It smells like mold in here, besides approximately else- fresh paint and something smoky, like someone has been cooking here. But that is impossible. These houses have been empty- for years.

Behind us, the raider is struggling in the dark. He bumps up against something and curses. A second later something crashes to the ground; glass shatters; more cursing. From the sound of his voice, I can tell that he is falling behind. 'Up,' Kellie whispers, so quiet and so close it is like I have only imagined it, and just like that he is lifting me, and I realize I am going out a window, feel the rough wood of the windowsill grate against my back, land on my good foot on the soft, damp grass outside.

Part: 8

Photos of Madalyn or as we girls call her here- Maddie! No makeup! Yet Maddie always looks gross- to me... ha- love- her too!

Rachel- dick in a condom- I think to myself- A second later Hanna follows soundlessly, materializing beside me in the dark. Though the air is hot, a breeze has picked up, and as it sweeps across my skin I could cry from gratitude and relief.

But we are not safe yet far from it. The darkness is mobile, twisting, alive with paths of light: Flashlights cut through the woods to our right and left, and in their glare, I see fleeing figures, lit up like ghosts like an angel like the dark that was Jenny, frozen for a moment in the beams. The screams continue, some only a few feet away, some so distant and forlorn you could mistake them for something else-for owl's hoot peacefully in their trees.

Then Kellie sees Jenny all the time that way or, so she said. has taken my hand and we are running again. Every single step on my right or left foot is a fire down below, a blade. I bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from crying out, as well as taste blood. It is falling apart, and so overgrown with moss and climbing vines that even from only a few feet it was a tangle of bushes and trees. I do what he says without being irresolute. A tiny wooden shed appeared miraculously in the dark. I must stoop to get inside, and when I do the smell of animal urine and the wet dog is so strong, I gag.

Confusion... Scenes from hell: floodlights from the road, shadows falling, bone-cracking, voices shattering apart, dissolving into silence.

'In here.' Alex comes in behind me and shuts the door. I hear a rustling and see him kneeling, stuffing a blanket in the gap between the door and the ground. The blanket must be the source of the smell. It reeks.

'God,' I whisper, the first thing I have said to him, cupping my hand over my mouth and nose.

'This way the dogs won't pick up our scent,' he whispers back matter-of-fact-like.

I have never met someone so calm in my life. I think fleetingly that the stories I heard when I was little were true-Invalids are monsters, freaks.

Then I feel embarrassed... He just saved my life.

He saved my life from the raiders. From the people who are supposed to protect us and keep us safe. From the people who are supposed to keep us safe from people like Hanna or her. Nothing makes sense anymore. My head is spinning, and I feel dizzy. I stumble, bumping against the wall behind me, and Alex reaches up to steady me.

'Sit down,' he says, in that same commanding voice he has been using all along. It is comforting to listen to his low, forceful directions, to let myself go. I lower myself to the ground. The floor is damp and rough underneath me.

The moon must have broken through the clouds; gaps in the walls and roof let in little spots of silvery light. I can just make out some shelves beyond Kellie or her or even her. head, a set of cans-paint, maybe? - Piled in one corner. Now that Hanna and I- Rachel, are both sitting there is hardly any room left to maneuver-the whole structure is only a few feet wide.

'I'm going to look at your leg now, okay?' He is still whispering. I nod okay. Even when I am sitting down, the dizziness does not subside. He sits on his knees and draws my leg into his lap. It is not until he begins rolling up my pant leg that I feel how wet the fabric is against my skin. I must be bleeding. I bite my lip and press my back up hard against the wall, expecting it to hurt, but the feeling of his hands against my skin-cool and strong- somehow dampens the whole kit and caboodle, sliding across the pain like an eclipse blotting the moon dark.

Once he has my pants rolled up to the knee, he tilts me gently, so he can see the back of my calf. I lean one elbow on the floor, feeling the room swaying. I must be bleeding a lot.

She let her breath out suddenly, a quick sound between her teeth.

'Is it bad is it not?' I say, too afraid to look. 'Hold still,' he says, like- I know that it is bad, but he will not tell me so, and at that moment I am so flooded with gratitude for him and hatred for the people outside-hunters, primitives; with their sharp teeth and heavy sticks, and the air goes out of me- and I must struggle to breathe.

I am not so into Kellie as I am Hanna, you see that I love them both yet her more, do you get that?

Yet we all want the same boy- so I do what I must.

It is nine inches cock- so yes... ha- be not- but you will never know.

Hanna reaches into a corner of the shed without removing my leg from his lap. He fiddles with a box of some kind and metal latches creak open. A second later he is hovering over my leg with a bottle.

'This is going to burn for a second,' he says. Liquid splatters my skin, and the astringent smell of alcohol makes my nostrils flare. Flames lick up my leg and I nearly scream. Alex reaches out a hand, and without thinking I take it and squeeze.

'What is that?' I force it out through gritted teeth.

‘Rubbing alcohol,’ he says. ‘Prevents infection.’

‘How did you know it was here?’ I ask, but he does not answer.

He draws his hand away from mine and I realize I have been grabbing onto him, hard. But I do not have the energy to be embarrassed or afraid: The room is pulsing, the half-darkness growing fuzzier.

‘Shit,’ Kellie mutters. ‘You’re bleeding.’

‘It doesn’t hurt that much,’ I whisper, which is a lie. But he is so calm, so together, it makes me want to act brave too.

Everything has taken on a strange, distant quality—the sound of running and shouting outside gets warped and weird like they are being filtered through water, and Kellie looks miles away. I start to think I might be dreaming, or about to pass out. And then I decide I am dreaming because as I am watching, Kellie starts peeling her shirt off over her head.

What are you doing? I scream. Kellie finishes shaking loose the shirt and begins tearing the fabric into long strips, shooting a nervous glance at the door, and pausing to listen every time the cloth goes rip.

Part: 9

I’ve never in my whole life seen a guy without a shirt on, except for little kids or from a distance on the beach, when I have been too afraid to look for fear of getting in trouble.

Now I cannot stop staring. The moonlight just touches his shoulder blades, so they glow slightly, like wingtips, like pictures of angels I have seen in textbooks. Hanna is thin but muscular, too: When he moves, I can make out the lines of his arms and chest, so strangely, incredibly, beautifully different from a girl’s, a body that makes me think of running and being outside of warmth and sweating. Heat starts beating through me, a thrumming feeling like a thousand tiny birds have been released in my chest.

I am not sure if it is from the bleeding, but the room feels like it is spinning so fast we are in danger of flying out of it, both of us, getting thrown out into the night. Before, Kellie seemed far away. Now the room is full of him: He is so close I cannot breathe, cannot move, speak, or think. Every time he brushes me with his fingers, time seems to teeter for a second, like it is in danger of dissolving. The entire world is dissolving, I decide, except for us. Us.

‘Hey.’ He reaches out and touches my shoulder, just for a second, but in that second my body shrinks down to that single point of pressure under his hand and glows with warmth. I have never felt like this, so calm and peaceful. I am dying... The idea does not upset me, for some reason. It seems funny. ‘You, okay?’ ‘Fine.’ I start to giggle softly. ‘You’re naked.’

‘What?’ Even in the dark, I can tell he is squinting at me.

‘I have never seen a boy like-like that.

‘With no shirt on. Not up close.’ He begins wrapping the shredded T-shirt around my leg carefully, tying it tight. ‘The dog got you good,’ he says.

‘But this should stop the bleeding.’ The phrase stops- the bleeding sounds so clinical and scary it snaps me awake and helps me to focus. Kellie finishes tying off the makeshift bandage. Now the searing pain in my leg has been replaced by dull, throbbing pressure. Alex lifts my leg carefully out of his lap and rests it on the ground. ‘Okay?’ he says, and I nod.

Then he scoots around next to me, leaning back against the wall like I am so we are sitting side by side, arms just touching our elbows. I can feel the heat coming off his bare skin, and it makes me feel hot. I close my eyes and try not to think about how close we are, or what it would feel like to run my hands over his shoulders and chest.

Outside, the sounds of the raid grow increasingly distant, the screams fewer, the voices fainter. The raiders must be passing on. I say a silent prayer that Hana managed to escape; the possibility that she did not is too terrible to contemplate.

Still, Kellie and I do not move. I am so tired I feel like I could sleep forever. Home seems impossible, incomprehensibly far away, and I do not see how I will ever make it back. Kellie starts speaking all at once, his voice a low, urgent rush: ‘Listen, Liv. What happened at the beach- I am sorry? I should have told you sooner, but I did not want to frighten you away.’ ‘You don’t have to explain,’ I say.

‘But I want to explain. I want you to know that I did not mean to-’ ‘Listen,’ I cut him off. ‘I am not going to tell anyone, okay? I am not going to get you in trouble or anything.’ She pauses. He turns to look at me, but I keep my eyes fixed on the darkness in front of us.

‘I don’t care about that,’ she says, lower. Another pause, and then: ‘I just don’t want you to hate me.’ Again, the room is shrinking, closing in around us. I can feel his eyes on me like the hot pressure of touch, but I am too afraid to look at him. I am afraid that if I do, I will lose myself in his eyes, and forget all the things I am supposed to say.

Outside, the woods have fallen silent.

The raiders must have left. After a second the crickets begin singing all at once, warbling throatily, a great swelling of sound.

‘Why do you care?’ I say, barely a whisper.

‘I told you,’ He whispers back. I can feel his breath just tickling the space behind my ear, making the hair prick up on my neck. ‘I like you.’

‘You don’t know me,’ I say quickly.

‘I want to, though.’ The room is spinning increasingly quickly. I press up more confidently against the wall, trying to stabilize myself against the feeling of dizzying movement.

It is impossible: She has an answer for everything. It is too quick. It must be a trick. I press my palms against the damp floor, taking comfort in the solidity of the rough wood.

Part: 10

‘Why me?’

I do not mean to ask it, but the words slide out. ‘I’m nobody.’ I want to say, I am nobody special, but the words dry up in my mouth. This is what I imagine it wants to climb to the top of a mountain, where the air is so thin you can inhale and inhale and inhale and still feel like you cannot take a breath.

Ray does not answer, and I realize he does not have an answer, just like I suspected- there is no reason for it at all. He has picked me at random, as a joke, or because he knew I would be too scared to tell on him.

‘My point is that it is possible to get in and out. Difficult, but possible. I moved in with two strangers-supporters, both and was told to call them my aunt and uncle.’ He shrugs ever so slightly next to me. ‘I did not care. I had never known my real parents, and I had been raised by dozens of different aunts and uncles. It did not make a difference to me.’

But then he starts speaking. His story is so rapid and fluid you can tell he has thought about it a lot, the kind of story you tell over and over to yourself until the edges get all smoothed over. 'I was born in the Wilds.

My mother died right afterward, my father's death. He never knew he had a son. I lived there for the first part of my life, just bouncing around. All the other'- he hesitates slightly, and I can hear the grimace in his voice- 'Invalids took care of me together. Like a community thing...'

Outside, the crickets pause temporarily in their song. For a second it is like nothing bad has happened like nothing has happened tonight out of the ordinary at all-just another hot and lazy summer night, waiting for morning to peel it back. Pain knifes through me at that moment, but it has nothing to do with my leg. It strikes me how small everything is, our entire world, everything with meaning-our stores and our raids and our jobs and our lives, even.

Meanwhile, the world just goes on the same as always, night cycling into day and back into the night, an endless circle; seasons shifting and reforming like a monster shaking off its skin and growing it again.

Ray keeps talking. 'I came into Pitt when I was ten, to join up with the resistance here. I will not tell you how. It was complicated. I got an ID number; I got a new last name, a new home address. There are more of us than you think- Invalids, and supporters, too- more of us than anybody distinguish. We have people in the police force and all the municipal subdivisions. We have people in the labs, even.' Goosebumps pop up all over my arms when he says this.

I love her and him too what can I do...

I have fallen for them.

The tied bit with me- at the top of your vagina. do you ever just tickle and pull up where the hair and end and the shat starts, and it pulls the hood up some and feels so good? Just the tip poops out a little, do you do that?

Part: 11

Anne's face turned colors, as though Maggie was watching her on a screen, and someone had just adjusted the contrast. 'You're - you're joking.'

Maggie managed to shake her head.

'How?' Anne said.

Before Maggie could speak, Joh- John cut in, 'It was my fault.' At last, Maggie found her voice.

'No. Joh- John had nothing to do with it. It was me. It was - the game.'

'The game?' Anne squinted at Maggie as she had never seen her before. 'The game?' 'Terror,' Maggie said. Her voice was hoarse. 'I opened the gates... I must have forgotten to lock them again.' For a second, Anne was silent. Her face was awful to see white and ghastly. Horrified.

'But I was the one who told her to do it,' Joh- John said suddenly. 'It's my fault...'

No.' Maggie was embarrassed that Joh- John felt he had to stand up for her, even as she was grateful to him. 'He had nothing to do with it.'

'I did.' Joh- John's voice got louder.

He was sweating. 'I told her to do it. I told all of them to do it. I started the fire at Graybill place. I am the one.'

His voice broke. He turned to Maggie.

His eyes were pleading, desperate. 'I am a judge. That is what I wanted to tell you. That is what I wanted to explain. What you saw the other day, with Vivian -' He did not finish.

Maggie could not speak either. She felt like time had stopped; they were all transformed into statues. Joh- John's words were sifting through her like snow, freezing her insides, and her ability to speak.

Impossible... Not Joh- John. He had not even wanted her to play...

'I don't believe it.' She heard the words, and only then realized she was speaking.

'It's true...' Now he turned back to Anne. 'It was not Maggie's fault. You must believe me.' Anne brought her hand briefly to her forehead, as though pressing back pain.

She closed her eyes... Lily was still standing several feet away, shifting her weight, anxious and silent. Anne opened her eyes again. 'We need to call the police,' she said quietly. 'They'll need to put out the alert.'

Joh- John nodded. But for a second no one moved. Maggie wished Anne would yell-it would be so much easier.

And Joh- John's words kept swirling through her: I told her to do it. I told all of them to do it.

'Come on, Lily,' Anne said.

'Come inside with me.' Maggie started to follow them into the house, but Anne stopped her. 'You wait out here,' she said sharply. 'We'll talk in a bit.'

Her words brought little knife aches of pain to Maggie's stomach. It was all over. Anne would hate her now. Lily shot Maggie a worried glance and then hurried after Anne. Joh- John and

Maggie was left standing alone in the yard, as the sun pushed through the clouds, and the day transformed into a microscope, focusing its heat.

'I'm sorry, Maggie,' Joh- John said. 'I could not tell you. I wanted to- you to have to know that. But the rules-'

'The rules?' she repeated. The anger was bubbling up from a crack opening inside her. 'You lied to me. About everything. You told me not to play, and all this time.'

'I was trying to keep you safe,' he said. 'And when I knew you would not back down, I tried to help you.'

'Whenever I could, I tried.' Joh- John had moved closer and his arms where out- he was reaching for her. She took a step backward.

'You almost got me killed,' she said. 'The gun- if it wasn't for Marcel.'

'I told Marcel to do it,' Joh- John cut in. 'I made sure of it.' Click-click-click. Memories slotted together: Joh- John insists on taking the shortcut that led past Trigger-Happy Jack's house. The fireworks at the Graybill house on the Fourth of July, which Joh- John made sure she would see.

A clue: fire.

'You must believe me, Maggie.'

I never meant to lie to you.'

'So why did you do it, Joh- John?'

Maggie crossed her arms. She did not want to listen to him. She wanted to be angry. She wanted to give in to the black tide, let it suck away all her other

thoughts about the tigers, about how badly she had disappointed Anne, about how she would be homeless again.

‘What did you need to prove so badly, huh?’ More parts of her were flaking off. Crack. ‘That you are better than us? Smarter than us? We get it, okay? You are leaving.’ Crack. ‘You are getting out of here. That makes you smarter than the whole freaking rest of us put together.’ Joh- John’s mouth was as thin as a line. ‘You know what your problem is?’ he said quietly. ‘You want everything to be shitty. You have a sister who loves you. Friends who love you. I love you, Maggie.’ He said it recklessly, in a mumble, and she could not even be happy, because he kept going.

‘You have endured everyone in Fear. But all you see is the crap. So, you do not have to believe in anything. So, you will have an excuse to fail.’ Crack. Maggie turned around, so if she started crying again, he would not see. But she realized she had nowhere to go. There was the house, the high bowl of the sky, and the sun like a laser.

And she, Maggie, had no place in any of it. The last bits of her broke apart and opened like a wound: she was all hurt and angry.

‘You know what I wish? I wish you were gone already.’

She thought he might start yelling. She was almost hoping he would. But instead, he just sighed and rubbed his forehead. ‘Look, Maggie. I do not want to fight with you. I want you to understand-’

‘Didn’t you hear me? Just go.

Leave... Get out of here.’ She swiped at her eyes with the palm of her hand. His voice was screaming in her head. You want everything to be shitty - so you will have an excuse to fail.

‘Maggie.’ Joh- John put a hand on her shoulder, and she shook him off.

‘I don’t know how many other ways I can say it.’ Joh- John hesitated. She felt him close to her, felt the warmth of his body, like a comforting force, like a blanket. For one wild second, she thought he would refuse, he would turn around and hug her and tell her he was never leaving. For one wild second, it was what she wanted more than anything. Instead, she felt his fingers just graze her elbow.

‘I did it for you,’ he said in a faint voice. ‘I was planning to give you the money.’ His voice cracked a little. ‘Everything I’ve ever done is for you, Maggie.’

Then he was gone. He turned around, and by the time she could not stand it anymore and her legs were about to give out and the anger had turned to eight different tides pulling her to pieces, and she thought to turn around and call out for him-by then he was in the car and could not hear her.

It was an upside-down day for Carp. Joh- John Marks turned himself into the police for the murder of Little Kelly- even though, as it turned out, Little Kelly had not been killed in the fire at the Graybill house.

Still, no one could believe it: Joh- John Marks, that nice kid from down the way, whose dad had a frame shop over in Hudson. Shy kid. One of the good ones. At the police station, Joh- John denied the fire had anything to do with Panic. A prank, he said. Upside down and inside out.

Sign of the messed-up times we are living in. That night, Kirk Finnegan came outside when his dogs began to go crazy. He was carrying a rifle, suspecting drunk kids, or his piece-of-shit neighbor, who had recently started parking on Kirk's property and could not be convinced that it was not his right. Instead, he saw a tiger.

A f*cking tiger, right there in his yard, with its enormous mouth around one of Kirk's cocker spaniels.

He thought he was dreaming, hallucinating, drunk. He was so scared he peed in his boxer shorts and did not notice until later.

He acted without thinking, swung the rifle up, fired four shots straight into the tiger's flank, and kept firing, even after it collapsed...

Even after by some grace-of-God miracle its jaws went slack, and his spaniel got to his feet and started barking again-kept firing, because those eyes kept staring at him, dark as an accusation or a lie.

Part: 12

TUESDAY,

AUGUST 16

Maggie-

MAGGIE HAD SUCCESSFULLY MANAGED TO AVOID talking to Anne for an entire day.

After her fight with Joh- John, she had walked two miles to the gully, and spent the afternoon cursing and throwing rocks at random things (street signs, when there were any; fences; and abandoned cars.)

His words played on endless repeat in her head. You want everything to be shitty - so you will have an excuse to fail.

Unfair, she wanted to scream. But a second, smaller voice in her head said, True.

Those two words -unfair and true-pinged back and forth in her head, like her mind, were a giant Ping-Pong table. By the time she returned from the gully, it was evening and both Anne and Lily were gone.

She was seized with a sudden and irrational fear that Anne had taken Lily back to 'Fresh Pines.' Then she saw a note on the kitchen table.

Grocery store, it said simply.

It was only seven-thirty, but Maggie curled up in bed, under the covers, despite the stifling heat, and waited for sleep to put a stop to the Ping-Pong game in her mind.

Nonetheless, when she woke up early when the sun was still making its first, tentative entry into the room, poking like an exploratory animal through the blinds -she knew there was no avoiding it anymore.

Overnight, the Ping-Pong game had been resolved, and the word true had appeared victorious.

What Joh- John had said was true. She felt even worse than she had the day before, which she had not believed was possible.

Already, she could hear Anne's noises from downstairs: the clink-clink-clink of dishes coming out of the dishwasher, the squeak of the old wooden floorboards.

When waking up in 'Fresh Pines' to the usual explosion of sounds-cars backfiring, people yelling, doors banging and dogs barking, and loud music-she had dreamed of just this kind of home, where mornings were quiet, and mothers did dishes and got up early and then yelled at you to get up.

It funny how in such an abbreviated time, Anne's house had become more like home than 'Fresh Pines' had ever been. And she had ruined it. Another truth...

By the time she came downstairs, Anne was on the porch. She called Maggie out to her immediately, and Maggie knew this was it.

Maggie was shocked to see a squad car parked some little ways down the drive, half pulled off into the underbrush. The police officer was outside, leaning his butt against the hood of the car, drinking a coffee, and smoking.

‘What’s he doing here?’ Maggie said, forgetting for a moment to be scared. Anne was sitting on the porch swing without swinging. Her knuckles around her mug of tea were very white.

‘They think the other one might come back.’ She looked down. ‘The ASPCA would at least use a stun gun...’ ‘The other one?’ Maggie said. ‘You didn’t hear?’ Anne said. And she told her: about Kirk Finnegan and his dog and the gunshots, twelve in total.

By the time she was done, Maggie’s mouth was as dry as sand. She wanted to hug Anne, but she was paralyzed, unable to move.

Anne shook her head. She kept her eyes on the mug of tea; she had not yet taken a sip. ‘I know it was irresponsible, keeping them here.’ When she finally looked up, Maggie saw she was trying not to cry. ‘I just wanted to help. It was Larry’s dream, you know. Those poor cats. Did you know there are only thirty-two hundred tigers left in the wild? And I do not even know which one was killed.’

‘Anne.’ Maggie finally found her voice. Even though she was standing, she felt like she was shrinking from the inside out until she was little-kid-sized.

‘I’m so, so, so sorry.’ Anne shook her head. ‘You shouldn’t be playing Panic,’ she said, and her voice momentarily held an edge.

‘I have heard too much about that game. People have died. But I do not blame you,’ she added. Her voice softened again.

‘You’re not incredibly happy, are you?’ Maggie shook her head. She wanted to tell Anne everything: about how she had been dumped by Matt just when she was ready to say I love you; about how she realized now she had not loved him at all, because she had always been in love with Joh- John; about her fears that she would never get out of Carp and it would eat her up, swallow her as it had her mom, turn her into one of those brittle, bitter women who are old and drug-eaten and done at twenty-nine.

But she could not speak. There was a thick knot in her throat.

‘Come here.’ Anne patted the swing next to her. And then, when Maggie sat down, she was shocked: Anne put her arms around her.

And suddenly Maggie was crying into her shoulder, saying, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.’ ‘Maggie.’ Anne pulled away but kept one hand on Maggie’s shoulder. With her other hand, she brushed the hair back from Maggie’s face, where it was sticking to her skin. Maggie was too upset to be embarrassed. ‘Listen to me.

I am not sure what this means for you and Lily. What I- did-keeping the tigers here -was illegal. If your mom wants to make a big deal out of it, if the county wants, the police might force you to go home. I will do everything I can to keep you here for as long as you and Lily want to stay, but-’ Maggie nearly choked. ‘You-you’re not kicking me out?’

Anne stared at her. ‘Of course not.’ ‘But-’ Maggie could not believe it. She must have misheard. ‘I was the one who let the tigers out. It is all my fault.’

Anne rubbed her eyes and sighed. Maggie never thought of Anne as old, but at that moment, she truly looked at it.

Her fingers were brittle and sun-spotted, her hair a dull and uniform gray.

Someday she will die. Maggie’s throat was still thick from crying, and she swallowed the feeling.

‘You know, Maggie, I was with my husband for thirty years. Since we were kids. When we first got together, we had nothing. We spent our honeymoon hitchhiking in California, camping out.

We could not afford anything else. And some years were extremely hard. He could be moody...’

She made a restless motion with her hands. ‘My point is, when you love someone, when you care for someone, you must do it through the good and the bad. Not just when you are happy, and it is easy. Do you understand?’

Maggie nodded, she felt as though there was a glass ball on her chest- something delicate and lovely, gorgeous that might shatter and crack if she said the wrong word if she disturbed the balance in any way.

‘So - you’re not mad at me?’ she asked. Anne half laughed. ‘Of course, I am mad at you,’ she said. ‘But that does not mean I do not want you to stay.

'That does not mean I have stopped caring.' Maggie looked down at her hands. Once again, she was too overwhelmed to speak.

She felt as though, just for a second, she had understood something vastly important, had had a glimpse of it: love, simple and undemanding.

'What is going to happen?' she said, after a minute.

'I don't know.' Anne reached over and took one of Maggie's hands. She squeezed... 'It's okay to be scared, Maggie,' she said, in a muffled voice, like she was telling her a secret.

Maggie thought of Joh- John, and the fight she had had with Nat. She thought about everything that had happened over the summer, all the changes and tension and weird shifts, as though the air was blowing from somewhere unfamiliar. 'I'm scared all the time,' she whispered.

'You'd be an idiot if you weren't,' Anne said. 'And you wouldn't be brave, either.' She stood up. 'Come on. I am going to put the kettle on. This tea is ice cold.' Joh- John had come clean to the police. He had been questioned for the better part of three hours and had at last been released back home to his father, pending official charges.

But he had lied about one thing. The game was not over. There were still three players left.

It was time for the final challenge.

It was time for Joust.

Part: 13

THURSDAY,

AUGUST 18

Marcel-

Marcel KNEW IT WAS JUST A MATTER OF TIME before Joh- John came to see him. He did not wait long.

Just three days after Joh- John had turned himself into the police for the Graybill fire, Marcel came home from work and spotted Joh- John's car.

He was not outside, though; Marcel was surprised to see that Dayna had let him in. Joh- John was sitting on the couch, hands on his knees, knees to

his chin, he was so tall, and the couch was so low. And Dayna was reading in the corner like it was normal, like they were friends.

'Hey,' Marcel said. Joh- John stood up, looking relieved. 'Let us go outside, okay?' Dayna looked at Marcel suspiciously. He could tell she was waiting for a sign, an indication that everything was okay. But he refused to give it to her. She had betrayed him-by changing, by suddenly flipping the script. Panic had been their game, a plan they had made together, a shared desire for revenge.

He knew that nothing could bring his sister back, and that, hurting Ray, or even killing him, would not restore Dayna's legs. But that was the whole point: Ray and Luke Hanrahan had stolen something Marcel could never get back.

So-o - Marcel was going to steal something from them. Now that Dayna was shifting, turning into someone he did not know or recognize-telling he was immature, criticizing him for playing, spending all her time with Ricky-he felt it even more strongly. It was not fair. It was all their fault.

Someone had to pay. Outside, he gestured for Joh- John to follow him into Meth Row. For once, there were signs of life here. Several people were sitting out on their sagging porches, smoking, and drinking beers. One woman had snaked a TV out into the front yard with her. Everyone was hoping to catch a glimpse of the tiger; in just a few days, it had become an obsession.

'I'm out, you know,' Joh- John said abruptly. 'I will not get my cut or anything.'

'It was all pointless.' His voice was bitter. Marcel felt almost bad for him. He wondered why Joh- John had ever agreed to judge, to go along with it. Or why anyone else agreed to it, for that matter. All of them- the players, the judges, -Digging, even had their secrets. The money was only part of it, and the stakes were much higher for each of them.

Marcel said, 'We are at the end. Why back out now?'

'I do not have a choice. I broke the rules. I talked.' Joh- John took off his hat, ran a hand through his hair, then smashed his hat back on. 'Besides, I hate it. I always have. F*cking Fear...'

It drives people crazy. It is crazy. I only did it because-' He looked down at his hands. 'I wanted to give Maggie my cut,' he said quietly. 'When she started playing, I had to keep going. To help her.

'And keep her safe.' Marcel said nothing. In a screwed-up way, they were both acting out of love. Marcel felt sad that he had not gotten to know Joh- John better. There was so much he regretted. Not spending more time with Maggie, for example. They could have been real friends.

And Nat, of course. He would royally screw things up with her. He wondered if all of life would be like this: regret piled on regret.

'Did you ever do something bad for a good reason?' Joh- John blurted out suddenly.

Marcel almost laughed. Instead, he simply answered, 'Yes...!'

'So, what does that make us?'

Joh- John said. 'Good, or bad?' Marcel shrugged. 'Both, I guess,' he said. 'Like everybody else.' He felt a sudden pang of guilt. What he was doing -what he wanted to do to Ray-was bad. Worse than anything he had ever done.

Nevertheless, there was that old saying: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That is all he was doing. Getting even.

He was not the one who had started this.

Joh- John turned to him and stopped walking. 'I need to know what you're going to do,' he said. Joh- John looked so lost, standing there with his big arms and legs as if he did not know how to work them.

'I'm going to keep playing,' Marcel said quietly. 'We are almost done. But not quite, not yet...'

Joh- John exhaled loudly, as though Marcel had just punched him in the stomach, even though he must have been expecting it. And Marcel suddenly knew how he could make Joh- John feel better, how he could do something good for a change, and how he could make sure that Ray lost.

'I can keep Maggie safe,' Marcel said. Joh- John stared at him. 'I can make sure she does not go up against Ray. I will make sure she does not get hurt. Deal?' Joh- John watched him for several long minutes.

Marcel could tell he was struggling with something; he did not trust-Marcel completely. Marcel could not blame him.

‘What do I have to do?’ Joh- John said.

Marcel felt a weightlift from his chest. One step closer. Everything was slotting into place.

‘A car,’ he said. ‘I need to borrow a car.’

Marcel had been worried Maggie would not listen to him. He was the one who had told her all deals were off, no splits. However, when he asked her to meet him at Dot’s, she agreed. It was ten p.m. the only time the dinner was ever empty, in between the dinner rush and the late-night crowd when couples blasted from the bar next door came in for pancakes and coffee to sober them up.

He explained what he needed her to do. She had ordered a coffee and made it light with cream. Now she stared at him mid-sip.

She set her cup back down.

‘You’re asking me to lose?’ she said.

‘Keep your voice down,’ Marcel said. His mom had worked the early shift and was out with Bill Kelly-they were goddamn inseparable at this, point-but he knew everyone else in Dot’s. Including Ricky, whom he could see every time the kitchen door opened and closed, grinning, and waving at him like an idiot.

Marcel had to admit the kid was nice. He had already sent out free grilled cheese and some mozzarella sticks.

‘Look, you do not want to go up against Ray, do you? The kid’s a beast.’ Marcel felt a tightening in his throat. He thought about why he was doing this-thought about Dayna wheeled home for the first time, Dayna falling out of bed in the night and crying for help, unable to climb back into bed. Dayna wheeled around and hopped up on pain meds- comatose. And even though she had seemed better and happier lately- hopeful, even he, Marcel, would never- ever forget. ‘He will knock you off the road, Maggie. You will end up losing anyway.’

She made a face but said nothing.

He could tell she was thinking about it.

‘If we play it my way, you still win,’ he said, leaning over the table, tacky from years of accumulated grease.

‘We split the money. And nobody gets hurt.’ Except for Ray. She was quiet for a minute. Her hair was swept back into a ponytail, and she was flushed from the summer outside. All her freckles had merged into a tan. She looked pretty. He wished he could tell her that he thought she was great. That he was sorry they had never been closer.

That he had fallen for her best friend and had messed it up.

But none of that mattered now.

‘Why?’ she asked finally, turning back to him. Her eyes were clear, grayish green, like an ocean reflecting the sky.

‘Why do you want it so bad? It is not even the money, is it? It is about the win. It is about beating Ray.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Marcel said a little. The kitchen doors swung open again and there was Ricky, his cook’s whites streaked with marinara sauce and grease, grinning, and giving him the thumbs-up. Jesus. Did Ricky think he was on a date? He turned his attention back to Maggie. ‘Listen. I promised Joh-John I would-’

‘What’s Joh-John got to do with it?’ she asked sharply, cutting him off.

‘Everything,’ Marcel said. He drained his Coke glass of ice, enjoying the burn on his tongue. ‘He wants you to be safe.’

Maggie looked away again. ‘How do I know I can trust you?’ she said finally.

‘That’s the thing about trust.’ He crunched an ice cube between his teeth.

‘You don’t know.’

She stared at him for a long second.

‘All right,’ she said finally. ‘I’ll do it.’ Outside, at the edge of the parking lot, the trees were dancing in the wind. Some of the leaves had already begun to turn. Gold ate up their edges. Others were splotched with red, as though diseased. Less than three weeks until Labor Day and the official end of summer.

Besides, only a week until the showdown. After saying goodbye to Maggie, Marcel did not go home straight away but spent some time walking the streets. He smoked two cigarettes, not because he wanted them, but because he was enjoying the dark and the quiet and the cool wind, the smells of autumn coming: a clean smell, a wood smell, like a house newly swept and sprayed down.

He wondered whether the tiger was still loose. It must be he had not heard anything about its capture. He half hoped he would see it, and half feared he would.

Overall, the conversation with Maggie had gone easier than he had expected. He was so close.

Rigging the explosion, he knew, would be the hard part.

Part: 14

MONDAY,

AUGUST 22

Maggie-

IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE

TIGERS' ESCAPE, MAGGIE was so- anxious she could not sleep. She kept expecting Krista to show up with some court order, demanding that Lily return home. Or, even worse, for the police officers or the ASPCA to show up and haul Anne off to jail.

What would she do then? But as more days passed, she relaxed. Krista realized she was happier with her daughters outside of the house. That she was not meant to be a mother. All the things Maggie had heard her say a million times. And although the police officers floated in and out, still trying to locate the second tiger, still patrolling Anne's property, and the ASPCA showed up to verify the conditions of the other animals and make sure they were all legal, Anne was not clapped in handcuffs and dragged away, as Maggie had feared.

Maggie knew, deep down, that her situation at Anne's was temporary. She could not stay here forever. In the fall, Lily had to go back to school. Anne was floating them, paying for them, but how long would that last? Maggie had to get a job, pay Anne back, and do something. She just kept clinging to the hope that Panic would fix it: that with the money she earned, even if she had to

split it with Marcel, she could rent a room from Anne or get her own space with Lily.

The longer she stayed away from 'Fresh Pines,' the more certain she became she would never, ever go back there.

She belonged here, or somewhere like it, somewhere with space, where no neighbors were crawling up your butt all the time and there was no shouting, no sounds of bottles breaking, and people blasting music all night. Somewhere between animals and towering trees and that fresh smell of hay and poop that somehow was pleasant. It was amazing how much she loved making the rounds, cleaning out the chicken pen and brushing the horses down, and even sweeping the stalls. It was amazing, too, how good it felt to be wanted somewhere.

Because Maggie believed, now, what Anne had said to her. Anne cared. I even loved her, a little bit.

Which changed everything.

Three days until the final challenge. Now that Maggie knew how it would go down that she would only be called on to lose in the first round of Joust, to Marcel-she felt incredibly relieved. The first thing she was going to do with the money bought Lily a new bike, which she had been eyeing when they took a trip to Target the other day.

No! First, she would give Anne some money, and then she would buy a bike.

And then maybe a nice sundress for herself, and some strappy leather sandals. Something pretty to wear when she finally worked up the courage to talk to Joh- John-if she did.

She fell asleep and dreamed of him. He was standing with her on the edge of the water tower, telling her to jump, jump. Beneath her-far beneath her- was a swollen rush of water, interspersed with bright white lights, like unblinking eyes passed in the middle of all that black water.

He kept telling her not to be afraid, and she did not want to tell him she was terrified, so weak she could not move. Then Marcel was there. 'How are you going to win if you're scared of the jump?' he was saying. Suddenly Joh- John was gone, and the ledge under her feet was not metal, but a kind of wood, half-rotten, unstable.

Boom!

Marcel was swinging at it with a baseball bat, whittling away the wood, sending showers of splinters down toward the water. Boom. 'Jump, Maggie.' Boom. 'Maggie.'

'Maggie...'

Maggie woke up to double-ness- Lily whispering her name urgently, standing in the space between their beds; and, like an echo, a voice from outside.

'Maggie Lynn!' the voice cried. Boom. The sound of a fist on the front door. 'Get down here! Get down here so I can talk to you.' 'Mom,' Lily said, just as Maggie placed the voice. Lily's eyes were wide.

'Get in bed, Lily,' Maggie said. She was awake in an instant. She checked her phone. 1:14 a.m. In the hall, a small fissure of light was showing underneath Anne's bedroom door.

Maggie heard sheets rustling. So, she had been woken up too. The banging was still going, and the muffled cries of 'Maggie!'

I know you are there. You going to ignore your mother?' Even before reaching the door, Maggie knew her mom was drunk. The porch light was on. When she opened the door, her mom was standing with one hand to her eyes, like she was shielding them from the sun. She was a mess.

Hair frizzy; shirt so low Maggie could see all the wrinkles of her cleavage and the white half-moons where her bikini had prevented a tan; jeans with stains; enormous wedge heels. She was having trouble standing in one place and kept taking miniature steps for balance.

'What the hell are you doing here?' 'What am I doing here?' She slurred... 'What are you doing here?' 'Leave.' Maggie took a step onto the porch, hugging herself. 'You have no right to be here. You have no right to come barging.'

'Right? Right? I got every right.' Her mom took an unsteady step forward, trying to move past her. Maggie blocked her, grateful, for the first time, that she was so big. Krista started shouting,

'Lily! Lily Anne! Where are you, baby?'

'Stop it.' Maggie tried to grab Krista by the shoulders, but her mom reeled away from her, swatting her hand.

‘What’s going on?’ Anne had appeared behind them, blinking, wearing an old bathrobe. ‘Maggie? Is everything okay?’

‘You.’ Krista took two steps forward before Maggie could stop her.

‘You stole my babies.’ She was weaving, swaying on her shoes. ‘You a mother fucking bitch, I should-’

‘Mom, stop!’ Maggie hugged herself tightly, trying to keep her insides together, trying to keep everything from spilling out.

And Anne was saying, ‘Okay, let us calm down, let us everyone calm down.’

Hands up, like she was trying to keep Krista at bay.

‘I don’t need to calm down-’

‘Mom, stop it!’

‘Get out of my way-’

‘Hold on, just hold on.’ And then a voice from the darkness beyond the porch: ‘What’s the trouble?’ A flashlight clicked on, just as the porch light went off. It swept over all of them in turn, like a pointed finger. Someone emerged from the dark, and came heavily up the stairs, as the porch light, in response to his movement, clicked on again. The rest of them were momentarily frozen. Maggie had forgotten there was a patrol car parked in the woods. The police officer was blinking rapidly like he had been sleeping.

‘The problem,’ Krista said, ‘is that this woman has my babies. She stole them.’ The police officer’s jaw was moving rhythmically like he was chewing gum.

His eyes moved from Krista to Maggie, to Anne, then back again. His jaw hinged left, and right. Maggie held her breath.

‘That your car, ma’am?’ he said finally, jerking his head over his shoulder, where Krista’s car was parked.

Krista looked at it. Looked back at him. Something flickered in her eyes.

‘Yeah, so?’

He kept chewing, watching her.

‘Legal limit .08.’ ‘I’m not drunk.’ Krista’s voice was rising. ‘I’m as sober as you are.’ ‘You mind stepping over here for a minute?’ Maggie found herself ready to throw her arms around his neck and say thank you. She wanted to explain, but her breath was lodged in her throat.

‘I do mind.’ Krista sidestepped the police officer as he took a step toward her. She nearly stumbled over one of the flowerpots. He reached out and grabbed her elbow. She tried to shake him off.

‘Ma’am, please. If you could just walk this way-’

‘Let go of me.’ Maggie watched it in slow motion.

There was a swell of noise. Shouting. And Krista was swinging her arm, bringing her fist to the officer’s face. The punch seemed amplified by a thousand: a ringing, hollow noise.

And then time sped forward again, and the police officer was twisting Krista’s arms behind her as she bucked and writhed like an animal. ‘You are under arrest for assaulting a police officer.’

‘Let go...!’

‘You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.’

She was like- handcuffed. Maggie did not know whether to feel relieved or terrified. Both, Krista was still shouting at the police officer led her off the porch, toward the squad car-calling up to Lily, screaming about her rights. Then she was in the car and the door closed and there was silence, except for the engine running on, the spit of gravel as the police officer turned a circle. A sweep of headlights. Then darkness. The porch light had gone off again.

-And-

Maggie was shaking. When she could finally speak, the only thing she could say was: ‘I hate her.’ Then again: ‘I hate her.’

‘Come on, sweetie.’ Anne put her arm around Maggie’s shoulders. ‘Let us go inside.’

Maggie exhaled some, she let the anger go with it. They stepped into the house together, into the coolness of the hall, the patterns of shadow and moonlight that already looked familiar.

She thought of Krista, raging away in the back of a police car. Her stomach started to unknot. Now everyone would know the truth: how Krista was, and what Maggie and Lily were escaping.

Anne squeezed Maggie. 'It's going to be okay,' she said. 'You're going to be okay.'

Maggie looked at her. She managed to smile. 'I know,' she said. The end of August was the saddest time of the year in Carp.

The saddest time everywhere? Every year, no matter what the weather, the public pools were suddenly clogged with people, the parks carpeted in picnic blankets and beach towels, and the road packed bumper-to-bumper with weekenders descending on Copake Lake.

A shimmering veil of exhaust hung over the trees, intermingling with the smell of charcoal and smoke from a hundred fire pits. It was the final, explosive demonstration of summer, the line in the sand, a desperate attempt to hold fall...

This is the first thing you will open, do not let it stop you unless you are saying you cannot handle the fact that you are being a teen girl hypocrite, remember we are just girls being girls and the next page is going to make you judge me...

Yet should I judge you first if you close the book of my life, yet, if you think about it- you are a girl, and at some point, in your day you would like me, and looking up to your hero- just like me, and she will always be.

This is my disclaimer now- if you do not want to know me over me being me, then go away... yet I am sure you will like me, and then maybe not- it is up to you.

You will understand by the end...

'Say HELLO to my sister!'

(Picture this... She has her hand up in this photo- not looking a day over pubescent- yet she thinks she is a hot woman- and to me being a woman means you either have been penetrated, or you have hardcore intercourse, her eyes flirty her top pushed up showing her mosquito, she calls boobs, she waving like a dumb but, and a sinful smile, and the tucked tight line she calls her goodies and the bean that looks like there is too much hanging from it.)

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 23

Kiss me Here

Part- 1

I - Karly Make \$10,000 a week just making cummie on cam! Other jobs can go suck it! That is \$400 a day, and like 3 shows- so about 5 times making cummie!!

Part- 2

Here are the facts.

- When you look bored; you are much less likely to make any money because your guests will get bored along with you.
- With the proper equipment, training, and attitude - a new model does have the potential to start off making anywhere from \$20 - \$40 per hour.
- I read all the tips I could find before I started, and I did my best to have a good setup. During my first week at camp, I was shy and awkward - and I averaged about \$13 per hour.
- The better she is; the easier it will be to start.
- In the long run; though; a great personality is much more important to the longevity of her career as a webcam model.
- The more a camgirl is willing to do on cam; the higher her earning potential will be.
- If she is not willing to do some X-rated performances; she will have a harder time starting. That does not mean it is impossible; as of course, there are fetishes and niches out there that are in high demand as well. It is just a matter of finding her audience.
- Consistent earnings come from sticking to a consistent schedule and working toward developing a solid fan base.

Tip #1

New Model Status- Take Advantage of Extra Promotion

The promotion period varies from site to site; so, pay attention when you are setting up your account.

Streamate - 30 days (about 4 and a half weeks)

Chaturbate - 7 days

These examples are current while I am writing this, but you should always cross-reference them in case they become outdated.

The key to your success as a webcam model is your fan base. These are the top 5 tips to help you develop your solid foundation of loyal customers. Follow these from the start, and you will be setting yourself up for long-term success.

Tip #2

Treat Camming Like the Job it is- Consistency is Key Repeat customers become repeat customers because they know when you are open for business.

Imagine you are the customer for a sec. You are hooked on this awesome cam girl, and she tells you she is going to be online at a certain time; so, you go to meet her in her chat room. But she does not show up. Think you will be inclined to keep coming back?

Treat your customers like you would in any business and be reliable with your schedule.

Your consistent schedule will lead to your consistent fan base.

Tip #3

Tweet; Tweet; Tweet!

Twitter-

The second way to keep your consistent schedule is to keep up with Twitter. Get your fans following you so you can keep them updated on what sites you are using and what shows you are planning.

If you decide to try a new site, for example, your fan base will follow you there. Many camp sites do not allow mentioning other camp sites or outside contact information; so, Twitter serves as a platform where you are free to market yourself wherever you may be and stay connected with your loyal customers.

Get repeat boys and you have them giving you loads- in many ways! It is nice to have boys love you! When you are not particularly loved or love yourself. And doing this I do not feel that way. This is safe- and I do not freak some dick- that is going to be a dick to me the next or break my heart... see!

More on Twitter.

Tip #4

Money happens more when you do not think about it.

If you act like you are just there for the money, you are going to lose potential clients. Your guests want to believe that you WANT to be online hanging with them. Sure, at the back of their minds, they know you are working for an income, but that is not what they need to be focused on.

Chill out; enjoy getting to know your guests and learning to rock your camp. Get your fans' focus away from their wallets and they are more likely to open their wallets for you.

Get your fans' focus away from their wallets and they are more likely to open their wallets.

Tweet This.

Tip #5

Turn Up Personality; Be Assertive, and Be Ready for Anything-

Remember your personality is the ultimate factor as to whether you are going to gain a loyal following. Let yourself shine. Let them see you. Trust me; your quality fans will love you.

Know your boundaries and be ready to experiment within your boundaries. Customers love a camgirl willing to try new things within her limits. Eventually, you may even push those limits, but do not rush that process. Stay true to yourself and your personality, and your best fans will keep coming back for more.

Stay true to yourself and your personality, and your best fans will keep coming back for more.

- The ads report the earnings of the site's best models and usually state 'up to' - like how your Internet Service Provider says; 'up to,' the download/upload speeds you pay for lol.

- When you try too hard; you are much less likely to make any money because you look desperate.

- When you engage your visitors; keep a positive attitude and just be yourself on camp; you are much more likely to make money because your guests are more likely to find you entertaining and likable.

- I am about 5 years into this job. On my best days; I can make \$100 in an hour. On worse to average days; I can see anything from \$20 - \$50 per hour. Hell; this is better than \$2.50 at an eating hole- serving A-holes- where I get nothing- and the same gets it all!

- When they make those claims of weekly earnings or even sometimes monthly or yearly earnings; this is dependent on the model's stamina and how much time she wants to put into this.

- Sure; I could make \$100,000 in a year; if I worked 40-hour weeks; but I work less than 10 hours most weeks because it is better for my health and overall sense of well-being.

- It makes me feel good in all ways too- about me...

- The longer you stay logged on; the better your chances are of making money.

- Do not base your hourly wage on logging on for one hour and then logging off. It is average, and traffic comes and goes so it is best to try and be around when your guests are around.

- I would be willing to wager that every model in the history of webcam modeling has gone through a shift and earned zero dollars. This is unlikely... boys love to see girls make cummie!

Someone said to me- like- that I am a lazy girl- that people who want what I am are just abusing the system... if you say so... I do it for its fun and I make more than you do your shitty job so...

Eat me- ha- OUT!

I like it better than having some boss thinking he knows more than I do... I make my time... also; there are no mean girls I must work for or with... remember there is a lot of sucks out there with others... the real world is an ass... I am the queen bee! And they all just lllooovvveeee me!

'BE NICE OR YOU'LL BE BANNED!'

Part- 3

A text message from Jenny here sitting out the pot- 'There is nothing like the sweet pitter-patter of piss.'

Right on- I said back it just feels good to let it all out in three pushes!

Mumm hum...

THURSDAY;

AUGUST 25

Marcel,

THE DAY OF JOUST WAS WET AND VERY COLD. Marcel dressed in his favorite jeans and a worn T-shirt; emerged sockless into the den; ate cereal from a mixing bowl and watched a few realities TV shows with Dayna; then made some jokes about the douchebags who would let their whole lives get filmed. He seemed relieved that he was acting normally.

Nevertheless, the whole time his mind was several miles away; on a dark straightaway; on engines gunning and tires screeching and the smell of smoke. He was worried.

Worried the fire would start too early when Marcel was driving the car. Likewise, he was ever so worried that Ray would not go for the switch. He was counting on that; he had rehearsed a speech in his head.

'I want to change cars like now,' he would say after Maggie let him win the first round. 'So, I know it's fair... and so, like I know he didn't go turbo on his engine or screwed around with my brakes and all.'

How could Ray say no... to this?

If Marcel drove carefully; no more than forty miles per hour; the engine should not heat up too much, and the explosion would not get triggered.

Maggie had to let him win even if she was going to a crawl. Ray would never suspect.

And then she would get in the car; floor it, and the engine would start smoking and sparking- and even flaming and then - Revenge.

If everything went according to plan. If- if- if, Maggie hated that stupid word.

At three p.m. Kelly Bill came by to take Dayna to physical therapy. Yet Maggie thought she needed it more than this girl who was getting it for free.

Marcel did not understand or get, like how Kelly had just wormed his way into their lives.

Dayna was up to his ass all day- breathing offs farts.

Like they were suddenly all one big happy family unit in all; nonetheless, Marcel was the only one who could remember anything at all, they were not family; they would never be one. It had always been Marcel and Dayna and no one else, from a turning point in the time of their lives.

-And-

Now, he had even lost her, to his ways- of how he is and all.

‘You going to be, okay?’ She asked, confused.

She was getting good with her chair; spinning herself around furniture dumbly; bumping up the place where the floor was slightly uneven, just to be childlike and annoying. hated that she had had to get good at being crippled.

‘Yeah; sure,’ it was so deliberately do not, so- we all did not even look at her.

‘Just going to watch some TV and stuff like that.’

‘Okay have fun playing with yourself...’ she said.

‘We’ll be back in a couple of hours,’ she said. And then at that moment at that time and place- ‘I think it’s working; Marcel.’

‘I’m happy for you;’ he said. He was surprised and alarmed to feel his throat getting so-so tight. She was halfway out the door when he called her back. ‘Dayna;’ he said. All for you...

She turned. ‘What?’

He managed to smile. ‘Love yah, always- You and I always- that’s what we make.’

‘Don’t be such a dick then from now on- and I/we agree;’ she said and smiled back.

Then she wheeled out of the house and closed the door behind her, sighing- in happiness.

Maggie WITH EVERY PASSING MINUTE; WAS CLOSER TO THE END.

Maggie should have felt a sense of relief and letting go of a feeling of tenseness, but instead she was gripped all day with dread.

She told herself that all she had to do was lose. She would have to trust that Marcel would keep his promise about money- and love and everything that he had not held up to in the past- and if he had changed.

He was not playing for the money. She had always known that on some level. Nevertheless, she wished she had pushed him about what motivated him some.

That was making her jumpy- now; even at the very end of the game; she did not understand his end goal.

It made her feel as though other games were going on; secret rules and pacts and alliances being made, and she was just a pawn.

...Around five o'clock; the storm passed, and the clouds started to shred apart.

The air was so thick with moisture and mosquitoes, and all the roads would be slick and wet.

Bearing this in mind she reminded herself it would not matter at all.

She could back out; even; if she wanted to; pretend to flake out, or pussy out; at the last second.

Then Marcel and Ray could face off and she would be done. Still, the sick feeling of weight in her stomach; an itch under her skin- would not leave her.

Just had been moved. There had been no formal messages about it; no texts or emails, or even Facebook.

Joh- John was lying low and being mysterious... just in case anyone was angry about the way the game had shaken out.

Maggie did not blame him at all for this- and Vivian too; was keeping her head down.

For the first time in the history of the game, the final challenge would proceed with or without the judges.

...Apart from word had come back to Maggie; as it always did in a town so small; with so little but talk to feed it.

The officers and police officers were all posted all around the runway where Joust traditionally occurred.

So- a change in location, a spot near to the gully and the old train tracks.

Maggie wondered, with another pang, whether Nat would show up.

It was six o'clock when she left, her hands were already shaking, and she worried that in another hour or so she would be too nervous to drive, or she would flake out entirely.

Anne had agreed to let- Maggie use the car for that night, and Maggie hated herself for lying about why she needed it at all.

Likewise, she said to herself in her mind that this was it; the end no more lies from here on out.

Then she would be extra careful about everything- just like a young preteen girl, needed to feel safe and warm and content like a lost child, and pull the car off the road well before Marcel came anywhere close to her. Seeing her like this...

She did not say goodbye to Lily.

She did not want to make a big deal of it all and such.

It was not a big deal- at all. This was running through her head.

She would be home in a few hours.

She had just turned out of the driveway when she felt her I-phone- buzzing on her ass cheek.

She ignored it for the time being; but the calls started up again right away, even on vibrate.

-And-

Then a third time and even a fourth time. She ripped the battery out of the back by the fifth... and threw the phone to the floor, and the battery to the back.

She pulled over, to get all the flown parts of her phone, to see what could not weigh, Nat. As soon as she picked it up, she knew something was very, very wrong.

‘Maggie; please;’ Nat was saying; even before Maggie said- hello.

‘Something really- really- bad is going to happen. We must stop it- now.’

‘Hold on; hold on.’ Maggie could hear Nat sniffling. ‘Calm down. Start at the beginning.’

‘It’s going to happen tonight;’ Nat said as if foreseeing the future. ‘We must do something. He will end up dead. Or he will kill Ray.’ Maggie could barely follow the thread of the conversation.

‘Who?’

‘Marcel;’ Nat wailed. ‘Please; Maggie. You must help us.’

Maggie sucked in a deep breath hard and amazingly fast. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds completely with heavy rays.

The sky was streaked with fingers of red and orange; the exact color of new blood.

‘Who’s us...?’

‘Just come;’ Nat said. ‘Please. I will explain everything when you get here.’

Marcel; Marcel DROVE PAST THE GULLY JUST AFTER SIX O’CLOCK. The car Joh- John had lent him-a LeSabre that Marcel knew could never- ever- never- ever, ever- never- be returned- was old and temperamental, and drifted to the left whenever he did not correct it.

It did not matter at all. Marcel did not need it for exceptionally long.

He parked on the side of the road next to a yield sign on one side of the straightaway that had been selected for the challenge.

The road was dead people were discouraged by the severe weather.

Marcel was glad about this. He could not risk being spotted.

It did not take long at all. Like- It was surprisingly easy- kaddish stuff; which was so-so ironic; especially considering that Marcel had failed chemistry three times and was not exactly a science guy at all.

Funny to me, how easily you could look this shit up online, and just pass without knowing or even caring- yet that is the time we live in.

Explosives; bombs; Molotov cocktails; IEDs - anything you wanted.

Learning how to blow someone up was easier than buying a frigging beer.

Earlier that day, he would link a bit of an old Styrofoam cooler in some gasoline and pour the whole mixture into a mason jar.

Homemade napalm I call it- so-o it is as easy as making dressing for a Caesar salad, now he carefully duct-taped everything with a firecracker to the outside of the mission jar and tightly packed the whole thing down into the engine compartment.

Not too close to the exhaust manifold- he needed to get through the challenge with Maggie first.

And he would drive carefully; make sure the engine did not get too hot.

Then the car would go to Ray.

Ray would gun it, and the firecracker would ignite, and the jar would shatter; discharging the explosives.

Kaboom and all would be done!

All he had to do now was wait. But almost immediately; he got a text from Maggie. Need to pick it up.

Emergency, we must talk about this.

And then- now, Marcel cursed aloud. Then he had a sudden fear- she was going to back out. That would ruin everything. He wrote her back quickly. Corner of Wolf Hill and Pleasant Valley. Pick me up.

Coming; she wrote back. He walked in circles while he waited for her; smoking cigarettes. He had been calm before, but now he was filled with

anxiety; a crawling; itching sensation; as though spiders were scurrying under his skin.

He thought of Dayna in the hospital bed as he had first seen her after the accident-wide-eyed; a little blood and snot crusted above her mouth; saying; 'I cannot feel my legs. What happened to my legs?' Getting hysterical in the hospital room; trying to stand and landing instead in Marcel's lap. He thought of Luke Hanrahan; driving off with fifty grand, and the night

Marcel had stood outside the Hanrahan's house with a baseball bat and been too afraid to act.

And by the time Maggie pulled up; he felt a little better.

Maggie would not tell him anything in the car. 'What's this about?' he asked her. But she just kept repeating; 'Just hold on. Okay? She will want to tell you herself.' 'She?' His stomach flipped. 'Nat,' she said.

'Is she okay?' he asked. Nonetheless, Maggie just shook her head, indicating she would say no more. He was getting annoyed now.

This was a tough time; he needed to focus. His stomach was tight with nerves.

Or at the same time; he was flattered that Maggie needed him-flattered; too; that Nat might have asked to see him.

Then they still had two hours before full dusk. More than enough time.

There were two cars in Nat's driveway; one of them was a battered 1952 Ford truck he did not recognize.

He wondered if this was intervention for her and got that crawling feeling under his skin again.

'What's going on here...?' He asked repeatedly. 'I told you,' Maggie said.

'She'll want to explain it herself.' The door was unlocked. Weirdly, although the light was rapidly fading outside, there were no lamps in the house.

The air was dull and gray like the primer on the side of the old Ford truck; lying like a textured blanket over everything; smudging out details.

Walking into Nat's house, Marcel had the feeling he used to get in the church before giving up on that too- like he was trespassing on sacred ground.

There were thick trees everywhere; lots of nice-looking furniture; things that screamed money to him. But not a sound.

‘Is she even here...?’ he asked. His voice sounded extremely loud.

‘Downstairs, at that moment,’ Maggie moved ahead of him.

She opened a door just to the right of the living room.

A set of unfinished stairs led down into what was a basement.

Marcel thought he heard some slight movements; a whisper or footsteps; but then it stopped.

‘Go ahead;’ Maggie said. He was going to tell her to go first, but he did not want her to think he was afraid. Which he was; for whatever reason. Something about this place-the silence; maybe- was freaking him out.

As if sensing his hesitation, Maggie said; ‘Look; we will be able to talk down there. She will tell you everything.’ Maggie paused. ‘Nat?’ she called out.

‘Down here!’ Nat’s voice came from the basement. Reassured, he headed down the stairs; into the musty gritty; humid; underground air.

The basement was large and filled with discarded furniture. He had just reached the bottom of the stairs and turned around to look for Nat when the lights went off. He froze; confused and dazed.

‘What the-’ he started to say; but then he felt seized; heard an explosion of voices. He thought for one second this must be part of the game; a challenge he had not anticipated.

‘Over here; over here!’ Nat was saying. Marcel struck out; struggling, but whoever was holding him was big, fleshy, and strong. A guy, Marcel could tell by his size, and by the smell; too- menthol; beer; aftershave. Marcel kicked out; the guy cursed, and something toppled over. There was the sound of breaking glass. Natalie said; ‘Shit. Here. Here.’ Marcel was forced into a chair. His hands were twisted behind him; tied up with something. Duct tape. His legs; too.

‘What the freak?’ He was yelling now. ‘Get the freak off me.’

‘Sh-h-h, Marcel, It’s okay.’ Even now, here, Marcel was paralyzed by the sound of Natalie’s voice.

He could not even struggle. 'What the hell is this?' He spoke. 'What are you doing?' His eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark. He could just make her out; the wide contours of her eyes; two sad, dark holes.

'It's for you,' she said. 'For your good.'

'What are you talking about?' He thought; suddenly; of the car parked on Pleasant Valley Lane; the mason jar of gasoline and Styrofoam nestled in the engine like a secret heart. He strained against the duct tape binding him.

'Let me go.' It was said.

'Marcel; listen to me.' Nat's voice broke, and he realized she had been crying. 'I know- I know you blame Luke for what happened to your sister.'

'For the accident; right?' Marcel felt something ice-cold move through him. He could not speak at all. 'I don't know exactly what you're planning, but I won't let you go through with it,' Nat said. 'This has to stop now.'

'Let me go.' His voice was rising. He was fighting a panicked feeling; a sense of dull dread in his whole body; the same feeling he had had two years earlier; standing on the lawn in front of Hanrahan's house; trying to get his feet to move.

'Marcel; listen to me.' Her hands were on his shoulders. He wanted to push her off, but he could not. And another part of him wanted her and hated her at the same time. 'This is for you. This is because I do care.'

'You don't know anything,' he said. He could smell her skin; a combination of vanilla and bubblegum, and it made him ache. 'Let me go; Natalie. This is insane.' 'No. I'm sorry, but no.' Her fingers grazed his cheek. 'I will not let you do anything stupid. I do not want you to get hurt.'

She leaned even closer until her lips were nearly touching his. He thought she might be leaning in to kiss him, and he was unable to turn away; unable to resist. Then he felt her hands moving along his thighs; groping.

'What are you-?' he started to say. But just then she found his pocket and extracted his keys and phone.

'I'm sorry,' she said; straightening up. And she did truly sound sorry. 'You must believe me; it's for the best.'

A wave of helplessness overtook him completely. He made a final futile attempt to free himself. The chair moved forward a few inches or two on the concrete floor.

'Please;' he said. 'Natalie...'

'I'm sorry, Marcel;' Nat said. 'I'll be back as soon as the challenge is over; I swear.'

She was fumbling with her phone, and the screen lit up temporarily; casting her face in brightness; showing the deep, mournful hollows of her eyes; her expression of pity and regret. And lighting up; too; the guy behind her. The one who had wrestled Marcel into the chair.

He had gained weight at least thirty pounds-and he had let his hair get long.

Fifty grand was not sitting too well on him. But there was no mistaking his eyes; the hard set of his jaw, and the scar; like a small white worm; cutting straight through his left eyebrow. Marcel felt a fist of shock plunge straight through him. He could no longer speak or even breathe.

Luke Hanrahan.

Maggie-

MAGGIE WAITED IN THE CAR WHILE NATALIE AND LUKE did whatever they had to do. She was trying to breathe normally, but her lungs were not obeying and kept fluttering weirdly in her chest.

She would have to go up against Ray Hanrahan now. There was no giving in or weaseling out. She wondered what Marcel had planned for tonight. Luke had not exactly known either; although he had shown Nat and Maggie some of the threatening messages that had come from Marcel.

It was surreal; sitting in Nat's kitchen with Luke Hanrahan; football star Luke- Hanrahan; the homecoming king who had gotten kicked out of homecoming for smoking weed in the locker room during the announcement of the court.

Winner of Fright.

Who had once assaulted a cashier at the 7-Eleven in Happy when the guy would not sell him cigarettes? He looked like shit. Two years away from Cace had not done him any good; which was shocking to Maggie. She thought

all you needed to do-all all of them needed was to get out. But you carried your demons with you everywhere; the way you carried your shadow.

He would have found Nat; he said; because of a betting slip that had reached him in Buffalo. And because of that stupid video; one filmed at the water towers; which showed Marcel with his arm slung around Nat. Nat had been the easiest of the remaining players to locate, and he was hoping he could talk her into helping him convince Marcel to bow out.

Nat emerged from the house at last. Maggie watched her talking with Luke on the front porch; he was nearly double her size. It is crazy how several years ago;

Nat would have freaked at the idea that Luke might ever look in her direction or know who she was. It was so strange; the way that life moved forward- the twists and the dead ends; the sudden opportunities. She supposed if you could predict or foresee everything that was going to happen; you would lose the motivation to go through it all. The promise was always in the possibility.

‘Is Marcel, okay?’ Maggie asked when Nat slid into the car.

‘He’s mad;’ Nat said.

‘You did kidnap him;’ Maggie pointed out.

‘For his good;’ Nat said, and for a minute she looked angry. But then she smiled. ‘I’ve never kidnapped someone before.’

‘Don’t make a habit of it.’ They both seemed to have resolved not to mention their fight, and Maggie was glad. She nodded at Luke, who was getting into his truck. ‘Is he coming to watch?’

Nat shook her head. ‘I don’t think so.’ She paused and said in a deep voice; ‘It is awful; what he did to Dayna. I think he must hate himself.’ ‘He seems like he does;’ Maggie said. But she did not want to think about Luke, Marcel’s sister, or legs buried beneath a ton of metal rendered useless.

She was already sick with nerves.

‘Are you okay?’ Nat said.

‘No;’ Maggie said bluntly and belligerently.

‘You are so close; Maggie. You are at the end. You are winning.’

‘I’m not winning yet,’ Maggie said. But she put the car into gear. There was no more delaying it. There was hardly any light left in the sky as though the horizon were a black hole; sucking all the color away. Something else occurred to her. ‘Jesus. This is Anne’s car. I am barely allowed to drive it. I cannot go up against Ray in this.’

‘You don’t have to.’ Nat reached into her purse and extracted a set of keys; jiggling them dramatically.

Maggie looked at her. ‘Where’d you get those?’

‘Marcel,’ Nat said. She flipped the keys into her palm and returned them to her bag. ‘You can use his car. Better to be safe than sorry; right?’ As the last of the sun vanished, and the moon; like a giant scythe; cut through the clouds; they gathered...

Quietly they materialized from the woods; they came down the gully; scattering gravel; sliding on the hill; or they came packed together in cars; driving slowly; headlights off; like submarines in the dark.

And by the time the stars surfaced from the darkness; they were all there- all the kids of Cace; come to witness the final challenge, it was time.

There was no need for -Digging to repeat the rules; everyone knew the rules of Joust. Each car aimed for the other; going fast in a single lane.

The first person to swerve would lose...

And the winner would take the pot. Maggie was so nervous; it took her three tries to get the key to the ignition.

She had found the LeSabre pulled over on the side of the road; practically buried in the bushes. It was Joh- John’s car- Marcel must have borrowed it.

She was unreasonably annoyed that Joh- John had helped Marcel in this way. She wondered if Joh- John had risked coming tonight-somewhere in the crowd; the dark masses of people; faces indistinguishable in the weak moonlight.

She was too proud to text him and see.

Ashamed; too. He had tried to talk to her; to explain, and she had acted awful. She wondered whether he would forgive her.

'How are you feeling?' Nat asked her. She had offered to stay with Maggie until the last possible second.

'I'm okay;' Maggie said; which was a lie. Her lips were numb. Her tongue felt thick. How would she drive when she could barely feel her hands? As she pulled the car up to her starting position, the headlights lit clusters of faces; ghost-white; standing quietly in the shadow of the trees. The engine was whining like there was something wrong with it.

'You're going to be fine;' Nat said. She twisted in her seat. Her eyes were suddenly wide; urgent. 'You're going to be fine; okay?' She said it like she was trying to convince herself. -Digging was gesturing to Maggie; indicating she should turn the car around.

The engine was making a weird grinding noise. She thought she smelled something weird too; but then thought she must be imagining it. It would all be over soon; anyway.

Thirty; or forty seconds; tops. When she managed to get her car pointed in the right direction; -Digging rapped on her windshield with his fingers; gave her a short nod. At the other end of the road-a thousand feet away from her; a thousand miles-she saw the twin circles of Ray's headlights. They went on and off again. On and off. Like warning.

'You should go,' Maggie said. Her throat was tight. 'We're about to start.' 'I love you; Maggie.' Nat leaned over and put her arms around Maggie's neck. She smelled familiar and Nat-like, and it made Maggie want to cry; as though they were saying goodbye for the last time. Then Nat pulled away.

'Look; if Ray does not swerve- I mean; if you are close and it does not look like he is going to turn - You must promise me you will. You cannot risk a collision; okay? Promise me.'

'I promise;' Maggie said.

'Good luck.' Then Nat was gone. Maggie saw her jog to the side of the road.

And Maggie was alone in the car; in the dark; facing a long, narrow stretch of road; pointing like a finger toward the glow of distant headlights.

She thought of Lily...

She thought of Anne...

She thought of Joh- John. She thought of the tigers, and of everything she had ever screwed up in her life.

She swore to herself that she would not be the first to swerve. While in a dark basement; with the smell of mothballs and old furniture in his nose; Marcel realized; too late; why Nat had taken his keys-and; crying out; fought against his restraints; thinking of a little time-bomb heart; ticking slowly- away...

Something in the engine was smoking. Maggie saw little trails of smoke unfurling from the hood of the car; like narrow black snakes. But just then Digging stepped into the center of the road; shirtless; waving his T-shirt above his head like a flag.

Then it was already too late. She heard the high-pitched squeal of tires on asphalt. Ray had started to move. She slammed her foot on the accelerator and the car jumped forward; skidding a little. The smoke redoubled instantly; for a second her vision was completely obscured.

(Fear...)

Then it broke apart and she could see. Headlights are growing bigger. The slick sheen of the moon. And smoke; pouring like liquid from the hood. Everything was fast; too fast-she was hurtling down the road; there was nothing but two moons; growing larger

- closer-

The stink of burning rubber and the scream of tires - Closer; closer - She was hurtling forward. The speedometer ticked up to sixty miles per hour. It was too late to swerve now, and he was not serving either. It was too late to do anything but crash.

Flames leaped suddenly out of the engine; a huge roar of the fire. Maggie screamed. She could not see anything. The wheel jerked in her hand, and she struggled to keep her car on the road.

The air stank like burning plastic and her lungs were tight with smoke. She slammed on the brakes; suddenly overwhelmed with certainty- she would die. She saw movement from somewhere on her left someone running into the road- and realized; a second later; that Ray had swerved to avoid it; had jerked his wheel to the left and was plunging straight into the woods.

There was a shuddering crash as she sailed past him; flames licking her windshield. She was screaming. She knew she had to get out of the car now

before she hit anything. Skidding; shuddering; spinning in circles; the car was slowing; it was wandering toward the woods. Maggie fought to open the door.

The handle caught and she thought she would be trapped there as the fire consumed her. Then she thrusts with her shoulder and the door popped open and she jumped; rolled; felt the bite of asphalt on her arm and shoulder. She tasted all the dirt and grit that would fit in her mouth; heard a distant roar of sound as if individuals were yelling her name.

Sparks fell from the wheels of the car as it flipped off the road and into the woods. There was an explosion so loud; she felt it through her whole body. She covered her head. Now she could hear that people were calling her name-and Ray's; too.

A siren wailed in the distance, and for a second or so; she thought she must be dead. But she could taste blood in her mouth. If she were dead; she would not be able to taste any blood.

She looked up. The car was in ruins; a pillar of flame was eating it; turning it to rubber and metal. Amazingly, she managed to sit up, and then stand. She felt no pain as if she were watching a movie about her own life.

-And-

Now she could not hear anything... Nothing- not the voices calling to her; urging her out of the road; away from the car-not the sirens; either. She was in a watery, deep place of silence. She turned and saw Ray struggling to get out of his car. There was blood trickling down his face; three people were trying to pull him from the wreck.

When he had swerved; he had gone straight into a tree; the hood was crumpled; compressed in half.

And now she saw why...

Standing in the middle of the road; perfectly still; not twenty feet away; was the tiger.

It was watching Maggie with those deep black eyes; eyes that were old and sorrowful; eyes that had watched centuries go to dust. And at that moment; she felt a jolt go through her, and she knew that the tiger was afraid of the noise and the fire and the people shouting; crowding the road on both sides. But she, Maggie, was not afraid anymore.

She was compelled forward by a force she could not explain. She felt nothing but pity and understanding. She was alone with the tiger on the road. And in the final moment of the game; as smoke billowed in swollen plumes into the air and fire licked the sky; Maggie Nill walked without hesitation to the tiger, placed her hand gently on its head, and won.

Part- 4

SATURDAY;

OCTOBER 8

Maggie;

IN EARLY OCTOBER; CACE ENJOYED A WEEK OF FALSE summer. It was warm and bright and, if it were not for the trees that had already changed-deep reds and oranges interspersed with the deep green of the pines-it might have been the beginning of summer. One day Maggie woke up with a sudden; strong impulse to return to where the game had begun. A mist rose slowly over Cace; shimmering; dispersing finally in the mounting sun; the air smelled like the moist ground and Shaggy cut grass.

‘How’d you like to go swimming; Bill?’ she asked Lily when Lily rolled over; blinking; hair scattered across the pillow. Maggie could understand something clearly at the last pattern of freckles on Lily’s nose; individual lashes highlighted by the sun and thought her sister had never looked so pretty.

‘With Joh- John; too?’ Lily asked. Maggie could not stop herself from smiling. ‘With Joh- John; too.’ He had been driving home every weekend from college to fulfill his community service duties. And to see Maggie. In the end, she decided to invite Nat and Marcel too. It seemed right; somehow.

When the small yellow envelope containing a single gold key- the key to a strongbox at a local bank- had arrived mysteriously in the mail; she had collected and divided the money among the three of them.

She knew Marcel had given most of his portion to Kelly Bill; they were building a small memorial for Little Kelly at the site of the Grayed House; which had been demolished.

Nat was taking some acting classes in Albany, and she had gotten a job modeling clothes on weekends at the Happy Valley Mall. And starting in January, Maggie will enroll in the Jackson Community College’s program in veterinary services.

Maggie packed the trunk with a blanket; beach towels.

Mosquito repellent, and sunscreen; a stack of old, waterlogged magazines from Anne's living room.

A cooler full of iced tea; several bags of large bags of lay potato chips, and creaky beach chairs with faded; striped seats.

She could sense that tomorrow the weather would turn again, and the air would be edged with cold.

Soon Krista would get out of her thirty-day program, and then Maggie and Lily might have to return to Shady Pines; at least temporarily. And soon the months of rain would come.

But today was perfect...

They arrived at the estuary just before lunch. Nobody had spoken much in the car. Lily had squeezed in between Marcel and Nat in the backseat.

Nat braided a portion of Lily's hair and whispered to her about which movie stars she thought were the cutest; Marcel had leaned his head back against the window.

And it was only from the occasional way his mouth twitched into a smile that Maggie knew he was not asleep. Joh- John kept one hand on Maggie's knee as she drove; It still seemed miraculous to see it there. To know that he was hers as he always had been; in some way. But everything was different now.

Different and better. Once out of the car, all their restraint lifted. Lily went whooping into the woods, holding her towel over her head so it flapped behind her like a banner. Nat chased after her... swatting away the branches in her path; Marcel and Joh- John helped Maggie clear out the trunk, and together they all went pushing through the woods; loaded down with towels and beach chairs and the cooler clinking ice.

The beach looked cleaner than usual. Two trash cans had been installed at the far end of the shore.

And the sand-and-gravel strip of beach was free of the usual cigarette butts and beer cans; Sunlight filtering through the trees patterned the water in crazy colors- purples and greens and vivid blues.

Even the steep face of the rock wall across the water; from which all the players had jumped; now looked beautiful instead of frightening- flowers were growing out of fissures in the rock.

Then Maggie noticed tangled vines sweeping down toward the water. The trees at the top of the jumping point were fire-red already; burning in the sun.

Lily trotted back to Maggie as she was shaking out the blanket. There was a light breeze, and Maggie had to tamp down the corners with different belongings- her flip-flops; Joh- John's sunglasses; the beach bag.

'Is that it; Maggie?' Lily pointed.

'Is that where you jumped?'

'Nat jumped too;' Maggie said.

'We all did. Well; except Joh- John.'

'What can I say?' He was already unlacing his Converses. He winked at Lily. 'I'm chicken.'

Briefly, his eyes met Maggie's. After all this time, she still could not believe that he had planned fear or forgive him for not having told her.

She would never have guessed in a million years- her Joh- John; her best friend; the boy who used to dare her to eat her scabs and then almost throw up when she did.

However, that was the point. He was the same, and different. And that made her hopeful in a way. If people changed; it meant that she was allowed to change too. She could be different.

She could be happier. Maggie would be happier-being happier already.

'It isn't that high;' Lily said. She squinted. 'How'd you get up there?'

'Climbed,' Maggie said. Lily opened her mouth soundlessly.

'Come on; Lily!' Nat was standing by the water; shimmying out of her shorts. Marcel stood a short distance away; smiling out over the river, watching her. 'Race you into the water!'

‘No fair!’ Lily ran; kicking up sand; struggling out of her T-shirt at the same time.

Maggie and Joh- John lay down on the blanket together; on their backs.

She rested her head on his chest; every- so- often; he ran his fingers lightly through her hair. For a while; they did not speak.

They did not need to. Maggie knew that no matter what, he would always be hers, and they would always have this- a perfect day; a reprieve from the cold.

Maggie had started to drift off to sleep when Joh- John stirred. ‘I love you; Maggie.’ She opened her eyes. She was warm and lazy. ‘I love you; too,’ she said. The words came with no trouble at all.

...He had just kissed her once; lightly; on the top of her head, and then; when she tilted her face to his; harder; on the lips-when Lily began to shout.

‘Maggie! Maggie! Look at me!

Maggie!

Lily was standing at the very top of the rocks. Maggie had not seen her climbing; she must have been quick.

Maggie felt a pulse of fear...

‘Get down!’ She called out.

‘She’s fine;’ Marcel said. He was now standing in the water with Nat- Maggie could not believe Nat had managed to convince him to swim; or that he even owned a bathing suit.

One arm was wrapped around Nat’s waist. They looked amazing together; like statues carved from different colored rocks.

‘Watch me!’ Lily crowd, ‘I’m going to jump!’ She did; without hesitating; Lily threw herself into the air. For a second she was suspended there; legs and arms splayed; mouth open and laughing.

Then she was hitting the water and surfacing; spitting out a mouthful of water; calling; ‘Did you see...? I was not scared. Not at all...’ Then at that moment at that time, this feeling of joy flooded Maggie’s body and heart- made her feel light and dizzy.

She was on her feet and plunging into the water before Lily could reach the shore; splashing past Nat; who shrieked; tackling her sister as she tried to stand up and drag her back into the water.

'You weren't scared; huh?'

Maggie attacked Lily's bare stomach as Lily wriggled away from her; squealing with laughter; calling for Joh- John's help.

'Are you scared of being tickled; huh?'

Are you...?'

'Joh- John; help me!' Lily screamed as Maggie wrapped her in a bear hug.

She pauses... 'Look; you still have time; okay? I just do not want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people. I am just worried about you. But everything is fine; you are still okay.'

'You can't get rid of me that easily;' Joh- John said. He kept his arms around her waist. His eyes were the same blue green as the water. Her Joh- John, her best friend.

'Children; children; don't fight;' Nat said; teasing.

The wind lifted goosebumps on- Maggie's skin; but the sun was warm. She knew that this day, this feeling, could not last forever. Everything passed; that was partly why it was so beautiful.

Things would get difficult again. But that was okay too. The bravery was in moving forward; no matter what. Someday; she might be called on to jump again. And she would do it.

She knew, now; that there was always light beyond the dark, and fear; out of the depths; there was the sun to reach for, and air, space, and freedom. There was always a way up, and out, and no need to be afraid.

~*~

I have always been shy, and afraid that I will say or do the wrong thing. Hanna is the opposite.

But... um- lately; it has been more than that.

She has stopped caring about school altogether; for one thing and has been called to the principal's office many times to talk back to the teachers.

And sometimes in the middle of talking, she will stop; just shut her mouth as though she is running up against a barrier. Other times I will catch her staring out at the ocean as though she is thinking of swimming away.

Looking at her now; at her clear gray eyes and her mouth as thin and taut as a bowstring; I feel a tug of fear. I think of my mother floundering for a second in the air before dropping like a stone into the ocean; I think about the face of the girl who dropped from the laboratory roof all those years ago; her cheek turned against the pavement. I will give away thoughts about the illness. Hanna is not sick.

She cannot be. I would know. 'If they want us to be happy; they'd let us pick ourselves,' Hanna grumbles.

'Hanna;' I say sharply. Criticizing the system is the worst offense there is.

'Take it back...'

She holds up her hands... 'All right; all right. I will take it back.'

'You know it does not work. Look how it was in the old days. Chaos all the time; fighting, and war. People were miserable.'

'I said; I'll take it back.' She smiles at me, but I am still mad, and I look away.

'Besides;' I go on; 'they do give us a choice.'

Usually, the evaluators generate a list of four or five approved matches, and you are allowed to pick among them.

This way, everyone is happy. In all the years that the procedure has been administered and the marriages arranged; there have been fewer than a dozen divorces in Maine; less than a thousand in the entire United States- and in all those cases; either the husband or wife was suspected of being a sympathizer and divorce was necessary and approved by the state.

'A limited choice;' she corrects me. 'We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.'

'Every choice is limited;' I snap.

(‘That’s life...’)

She opens her mouth as though she is going to respond, but instead she just starts to laugh. Then she reaches down and squeezes my hand; two quick pumps and then two long ones. It is our old sign; a habit we developed in the second grade when one of us was scared or upset; a way of saying; I am here; do not worry.

‘Okay; okay. Do not get defensive. I love evaluations; okay? Long live-Evaluation Day.’

‘That’s better,’ I say, but I am still feeling anxious and annoyed. The line shuffles slowly forward, we pass the iron gates; with their complicated crown of barbed wire and enter the long driveway that leads to the various lab complexes. We are headed for Building.

The boys go in, and the lines begin to curve away from each other. As we move closer to the front of the line; we get a blast of air-conditioning every time the glass doors slide open and then hum shut.

It feels amazing; like being momentarily dipped head to toe in a thin sheet of ice; popsicle-style, and I turn around and lift my ponytail away from my neck; wishing it were not so damn hot.

We do not have air conditioning at home; just tall, gawky fans that are always sputtering out in the middle of the night. And most of the time- Carol will not even let us use those; they suck up too much electricity; she says, and we do not have any to spare. At last, there were only a few people in front of us. A nurse comes out of the building, carrying a stack of clipboards and a handful of pens and begins distributing them along the line.

‘Please make sure to fill out all required information,’ she says; ‘including your medical and family history.’

My heart begins to work its way up into my throat. The neatly numbered boxes on the page -Last Name; First Name; Middle Initial; Current Address; Age-collapse together. I am glad Hanna is in front of me.

She begins filling out the forms quickly; resting the clipboard on her forearm; her pen skating over the paper. ‘Next.’

The doors whoosh open again, and a second nurse appears, and gestures for Hanna to come inside with me. In her dark coolness of her; I can see a bright white waiting room with a green Cachet; she is standing over me.

'Good luck;' I say to Hanna.

She turns and gives me a quick smile.

But I can tell she is nervous; finally. There is a fine crease between her eyebrows, and she is chewing on the corner of her lip. She starts to enter the lab and then turns abruptly and walks back to me; her face wild and unfamiliar looking; grabs me by both shoulders; putting her mouth directly to my ear. I was so startled I dropped my clipboard.

'You know you can't be happy unless you're unhappy sometimes; right?' she whispers, and her voice is hoarse; as though she has just been crying. 'What?' Her nails are -Digging into my shoulders, and at that moment I am terrified of her.

'You cannot be happy unless you are unhappy sometimes. You know that is, right?'

Before I can respond she releases me, and as she pulls away; her face is as serene and beautiful, and composed as ever. She bends down to scoop up my clipboard; which she passes to me; smiling. Then she turns around and is gone behind the glass doors; which open and close behind her as smoothly as the surface of the water; sucking closed over something that is sinking.

The devil stole into the Garden of Eden. He carried with him the disease- Amor deliria Nervosa- in the form of a seed. It grew and flowered into a magnificent apple tree; which bore apples as bright as blood.

-From Genesis- A Complete History of the World and the Known Universe; by Steven Horace; Ph.D.; Harvard University By the time the nurse admits me into the waiting room; Hanna is gone-vanished down one of the antiseptic white hallways and whisked behind one of the dozens of identical white doors- although there is about a half-dozen; other girls; milling around; waiting. One girl is sitting in a chair; hunched over her clipboard; scribbling and crossing out her answers, and then re-scrubbing. Another girl is frantically asking a nurse about the difference between 'chronic medical conditions,' and 'pre-existing medical conditions.' She looks like she is on the verge of having fit- a vein is standing out on her forehead and her voice is rising hysterically-and I wonder whether she is going to list a tendency toward excessive anxiety on her sheet.

It is not funny, but I want to laugh. I bring my hand to my face; snorting into my palm. I tend to get giggly when I am extremely nervous. During tests at

school, I am always getting in trouble for laughing. I wonder if I should have marked that down.

A nurse takes my clipboard from me and flips through the pages; checking to see that I have not left any answers blank.

‘Lena Haloway?’ She says in the bright, clipped voice that all nurses seem to share like it is part of their medical training.

‘Uh-huh;’ I say, and then quickly correct myself. My aunt has told me that the evaluators will expect a certain degree of formality. ‘Yes. That is me.’

It is still strange to hear my real name, Holloway, and a dull feeling settles at the bottom of my stomach. For the past decade; I have gone by my aunt’s name;

Tiddle. Even though it is a stupid last name- Hanna once said it reminded her of a little kid’s word for peeing-at least it is not associated with my mother and father. At least the Tiddles are a real family. The Haloway’s are nothing but a memory. But for official purposes; I must use my birth name.

‘Follow me.’ The nurse gestures down one of the hallways, and I follow the neat tick-tock of her heels down the linoleum. The halls are blindingly bright. The butterflies are working their way up from my stomach into my head; making me feel dizzy, and I try to calm myself by imagining the ocean outside; it is ragged breathing; the seagulls turning pinwheels in the sky.

It will be over soon; I tell myself. It will be over soon and then you will go home, and you will never have to think about the evaluation again.

The hallway seems to go on forever. Up ahead a door opens and shuts, and a moment later, as we turned a corner, a girl brushed past us. Her face is red, and she has been crying. She must be done with her evaluation already. I recognize her; vaguely; as one of the first girls admitted.

I cannot help but feel sorry for her. Evaluations typically last anywhere from half an hour to two hours; but it is common wisdom that the longer the evaluators keep you, the better you are doing. Of course, that is not always true. Two years ago- Marcy Davies was famously in and out of the lab in forty-five minutes, and she scored a perfect ten. And last year Corey Wine scored a record for longest evaluation -three and a half hours and still received only a three. There is a system behind the evaluations; obviously; but there is always a degree of randomness in them too.

Sometimes, the entire process is designed to be as intimidating and confusing as possible. I have a sudden fantasy of running through these clean, sterile hallways; kicking in all the doors. Then, immediately, I feel guilty. This is the worst of all times to be having doubts about the evaluations, and I mentally curse Hanna. This is her fault; for saying those things to me outside.

You cannot be happy unless you are unhappy sometimes. A limited choice. We get to choose from the people who have been chosen for us.

I am glad the choice was made for us. I am glad I do not have to choose-but more than that; I am glad I do not have to make someone else choose me. It would be okay for Hanna, of course, if things were still the way they were in the old days.

Hanna; with her golden; halo hair, bright gray eyes, perfectly straight teeth, and the laugh that makes everyone in a two-mile radius whip around and looks at her and laughs too.

Even clumsiness looks good on Hanna; it makes you want to reach out a hand to help her or scoop up her books. When I trip over my own feet or spill coffee down the front of my shirt, people look away. You can almost see them thinking; What a mess... And whenever I am around strangers my mind goes fuzzy and damp and gray; like streets starting to thaw after a hard snow-unlike Hanna; who always knows just what to say. No guy in his right mind would ever choose me when there are people like Hanna in the world- It would be like settling for a stale cookie when what you want is a big bowl of ice cream; with whipped cream, cherries, and chocolate sprinkles included.

So, I will be happy to receive my neat; printed sheet of 'Approved Matches.' At least it means I will end up with somebody. It will not matter if nobody ever thinks I am pretty (although sometimes I wish, just for a second; that somebody would.) It would not matter if I had one eye.

'In here.' The nurse stops; finally; outside a door that looks identical to all the others. 'You can leave your clothing and things in the antechamber. Please put on the gown that is provided for you; with the opening to the back. Feel free to take a moment; have some water; do some meditation.' I imagine hundreds and hundreds of girls sitting cross-legged on the floor; hands cupped on their knees; chanting om and having to stifle another wild urge to laugh.

'Please be aware; however; that the longer you take to prepare, the less time your evaluators will have to get to know you.'

She smiles tightly. Everything about her is tight- her skin; her eyes; her lab coat. She is looking straight at me; but I have the impression that she is not focusing; that in her mind she is already tick-tocking her way back to the waiting room; ready to bring yet another girl down yet another hallway and give her this same story. I feel very lonely; surrounded by these thick walls that muffle all sounds; insulated from the sun, the wind, and the heat; all of it perfect and unnatural.

‘When you are ready; go on through the blue door. The evaluators will be waiting for you in the lab.’ After the nurse clicks away, I go into the antechamber; which is small and just as bright as the hallway. It looks like a regular doctor’s examination room.

There is an enormous piece of medical equipment squatting in the corner; emitting a series of periodic beeps; a tissue-paper-covered examination table; a stinging, antiseptic smell. I take off my clothes; shivering as the air-conditioning makes goosebumps pop up all over my skin; the fuzz on my arms standing up a little straighter. Great. Now the evaluators will think I am a hairy beast. I fold- my clothes; including my bra; in a neat pile and slip on the gown. It is made of super-sheer plastic, and as I wrap it around my body; securing it at the waist with a knot; I am fully aware that you can still see everything-including the outline of my underwear through its fabric.

Over. Soon it will be over. I take a deep breath and step through the blue door.

It is even brighter in the lab- dazzlingly bright; so, the evaluators’ first impression of me must be of someone squinting; stepping backward; bringing her hand to her face. Four shadows float in a canoe in front of me. Then my eyes adjust, and the vision resolves into the four evaluators; all sitting behind a long, low table. This room is exceptionally large and empty except for the evaluators and, in the corner, a steel surgical table that has been shoved up against one wall.

Dual rows of overhead lights beat down on me, and I notice how high the ceiling is- at least thirty feet. I have a desperate urge to cross my arms over my chest; to cover myself up somehow. My mouth goes dry, and my mind goes as hot and blank and white as the lights. I cannot remember what I am supposed to do; what I am supposed to say.

Fortunately; one of the evaluators; a woman; speaks first. 'Do you have your forms?' Her voice sounds friendly, but it does not help the fist that has closed deep in my stomach; squeezing my intestines.

Oh; God; I think; I am going to pee; I am going to pee right here. I try to imagine what Hanna will say after this is over when we are walking through the afternoon sunshine; with the smell of salt and sun-warmed pavement heavy on the air around us. 'God;' she will say. 'That was a waste of time. All of them are just sitting there staring like four frogs on a log.'

'Um-yes.' I step closer; feeling like the air has turned solid; resisting me.

When I am a few feet away from the table, I reach out and pass the evaluators my clipboard. There are three men and one woman, but I find I cannot focus on their features for too long. I scan them quickly and then shuffle backward again, getting only an impression of some noses; a few dark eyes; the winking of a pair of glasses.

My clipboard bobs its way down the line of evaluators. I squeeze my arms to my sides and try to appear relaxed. Behind me, an observation deck runs along the back wall; elevated about twenty feet off the ground. It is accessed through a small red door high up beyond the tiered rows of white seats that are meant to hold students, doctors, interns, and junior scientists. Not only do the lab scientists perform the procedure; but they also do checkups afterward and often treat difficult cases of other diseases.

It occurs to me that the scientists must perform the cure here; in this very room. That must be what the surgical table is for. The fist of anxiety starts closing in my stomach again. For some reason, though I have often thought about what it would be like to be cured, I have never really thought about the procedure itself- the hard metal table; the lights winking above me; the tubes, the wires, and the pain.

'Lena Haloway?'

'Yes. That is me.' 'Okay. Why don't you start by telling us a little about yourself?' The evaluator with the glasses leans forward; spreading his hands, and smiles. He has big, square white teeth that remind me of bathroom tiles. The reflection in his glasses makes it impossible to see his eyes, and I wish he would take them off.

'Talk to us about the things you like to do. Your interests; hobbies; favorite subjects.'

I launch into the speech I have prepared; about photography and running and spending time with my friends; but I am not focusing. I see the evaluators nodding in front of me, and smiles beginning to loosen their faces as they take notes; so, I know I am doing fine, but I cannot even hear the words that are coming out of my mouth. I am fixated on the metal surgical table and keep sneaking looks at it from the corner of my eye; watching it blink and shimmer in the light like the edge of a blade.

And suddenly I am thinking of my mother. My mother had remained uncured despite three separate procedures, and the disease had claimed her; nipped at her insides and turned her eyes hollow and her cheeks pale; had taken control of her feet and led her; inch by inch; to the edge of a sandy cliff and into the bright; thin air of the plunge beyond.

Or so they tell me. I was six at the time. I remember only the hot pressure of her fingers on my face in the nighttime and her last whispered words to me. I love you. Remember. They cannot take it- they cannot take much more.

I close my eyes quickly; overwhelmed by the thought of my mother; writing and a dozen scientists in lab coats watching; scribbling impassively on notepads. Three separate times she was strapped to a metal table; three separate times a crowd of observers watched her from the deck; took note of her responses as the needles, and then the lasers pierced her skin. Normally patients are anesthetized during the procedure and do not feel a thing, but my aunt had once let slip that during my mother's third procedure they had refused to sedate her, thinking that the anesthesia might be interfering with- amidst her brain's response to the cure.

'Would you like some water?' Evaluator One; the woman; gestures to a bottle of water and glass set up on the table. She has noticed my momentary flinch, but it is okay. My statement is done, and I can tell the evaluators are looking at me- pleased; proud like I am a little kid who has managed to fit all the right pegs in all the right holes that I have done an excellent job.

I pour myself a glass of water and take a few sips; grateful for the pause. I can feel sweat pricking up under my arms; on my scalp, and at the base of my neck, and I pray to God, they cannot see it. I try to keep my eyes locked on the evaluators, but there it is in my peripheral vision; grinning at me- that damn table.

'Okay now; Lena. We are going to ask you some questions. We want you to answer honestly. Remember; we are trying to get to know you as a person.'

As opposed to what? The question pops into my mind before I can stop it.

As an animal?

I take a deep breath; force myself to nod and smile. 'Great.' 'What are some of your favorite books?'

'Love; War, and Interference; by Christopher Malley,' I answer automatically. 'Border; by Philippa Harolde.' It is no use trying to keep the images away- They are rising now; a flood. That one word keeps scripting itself on my brain; as though it is being seared there. Pain. They wanted to make my mother submit to a fourth procedure. They were coming for her on the night she died; coming to bring her to the labs.

But instead, she had fled into the dark; winged her way into the air. Instead, she had woken me with those words- I love you. Remember...? They cannot take it. The wind seemed to carry back to me long after she had vanished; repeated on the dry trees; on the leaves coughing and whispering in the cold gray dawn.

'And Romeo and Juliet; by Krumenacker Shakespeare.'

Romeo and Juliet are required to be read in every freshman-year health class. The evaluator nodded; made notes.

'And why is that?' Evaluator Three asks.

It is frightening- That is what I am supposed to say. It is a cautionary tale; a warning about the dangers of the old world; before the cure.

But my throat seems to have grown swollen and tender. There is no room to squeeze the words out; they are stuck there like the burrs that cling to our clothing when we jog through the farms.

And at that moment; it is like I can hear the low growl of the ocean; can hear its distant; insistent murmur; can imagine its weight closing around my mother; water as heavy as stone. And what comes out is-

'It's beautiful...'

Instantly all four faces jerk up to look at me; like puppets connected to the same string.

‘Beautiful...?’ Evaluator One wrinkles her nose. There is a zinging; frigid tension in the air, and I realize I have made a big, big mistake. The evaluator with the glasses leans forward. ‘That is an interesting word to use. Remarkably interesting.’ This time when he shows his teeth; they remind me of the curved white canines of a dog. ‘You find suffering beautifully? You enjoy violence?’

‘No. No; that’s not it.’ I am trying to think straight, but my head is full of the ocean’s wordless roaring. It is growing louder and louder by the second. And now, faintly; it is as though I can hear screaming as well-as my mother’s scream is reaching me from across the span of a decade. ‘I just mean - there’s something so sad about it.’

I am struggling; floundering; feeling like I am drowning now; in the white light and the roaring. Sacrifice. I want to say something about sacrifice, but the word does not come.

~*~

‘Let’s move on.’ Evaluator One, who sounded so sweet when she offered me the water, has lost all pretense of friendliness. She is all business now.

‘Tell us something simple. Like your favorite color; for example.’ Part of my brain-the rational; the educated part; the logical me part- screams; Blue! Say blue! But this other; older thing inside of me is riding across the waves of sound; surging up with the rising noise. ‘Gray;’ I blurted out.

‘Gray?’ Evaluator Four splutters back. My heart is spiraling down to my stomach. I know I have done it; I am thankful; I can practically see my numbers flipping backward. But it is too late. I am finished-it is the roaring in my ears; growing louder and louder; a stampede; that makes thinking impossible. I quickly stammered out an explanation.

‘Not gray; exactly... Right before the sun rises there is a moment when the whole sky goes this pale, nothing color-not gray but sort of; or white, and I have always really liked it because it reminds me of waiting for something good to happen.’

But they have stopped listening. All of them are staring beyond me; heads cocked; expressions confused; as though trying to make out familiar

words in a foreign language. And then suddenly the roaring and the screaming surge and I realize, I have not been imagining them all this time.

People are screaming, and there is a tumbling; rolling; drumming sound; like a thousand feet moving together. There is a third sound too; running under both of those- a wordless bellowing that does not sound human.

In my confusion; everything seems disconnected; the way it does in dreams. Evaluator One half rises from her chair; saying; 'What the hell -?' At the same time; Glasses says; 'Sit down; Helen. I will see what is wrong.' But at that second the blue door bursts open and a streaming blur of cows- actual; real; live; sweating; mooing cows-come thundering into the lab. A stampede; I think, and for one weird; detached second, I feel proud of myself for correctly identifying the noise.

Then I realize I am being charged by a bunch of very heavy; very frightened herd animals and am about two seconds from getting stomped into the ground. Instantly I launch myself into the corner and wedge myself behind the surgical table; where I am completely protected from the panicked mass of animals. I poke my head out just a little; so, I can still see what is going on.

The evaluators are hopping up onto the table now; as walls of brown and speckled cow flanks fold around them. Evaluator One is screaming at the top of her lungs, and Glasses is yelling; 'Calm down; calm down!' even though he is grabbing onto her like she is a life raft, and he is in danger of sinking. Some of the cows have wigs hanging crazily from their heads, and others are half-swaddled in gowns identical to the ones I am wearing.

For a second I am sure I am dreaming. This entire day has been a dream, and I will wake up to discover that I am still at home; in bed; on the morning of my evaluation. But then I notice the writing on the cows' flanks- NOT CURE-DEATH.

The words are written in sloppy ink; just above the neatly branded numbers that identify these cows as destined for the slaughterhouse.

A little chill dance up my spine and everything starts clicking into place. Every couple of years the Invalids-the people who live in the Wilds; the unregulated land that exists between recognized cities and towns-sneak into

Pittsburgh and staged a protest.

One year they came in at night and painted red death skulls on every single one of the known scientists' houses. Another year they managed to break into the central police station; which coordinates all the patrols and guard shifts for Pittsburgh and move all the furniture onto the roof; even the coffee machines. That was funny; actually-and amazing since you would think Central would be the most secure building in Pittsburgh. People in the Wilds do not see love as a disease, and they do not believe in a cure. They think it is cruel. Thus; the slogan.

Now I get it- The cows are dressed up like us; the people being evaluated. Like we are all a bunch of herd animals.

The cows are calming down. They are not charging anymore and have begun to shuffle back and forth in the lab. Evaluator One has a clipboard in her hand, and she is swooping and swatting as the cow's butt up against the table; mooing and nipping at the papers scattered across its surface -the evaluators' notes; I realize; as a cow snaps up a sheet of paper and begins to rip at it with its teeth.

Thank God- The cows will eat up all the notes, and the evaluators will lose track of the fact that I was completely tanking. Half-concealed behind the table-and safe; now; from those sharp; stamping hooves- I must admit the whole thing is hilarious.

That is when I hear it. Somehow; above the snorting and stomping and yelling; I hear the laugh above me low, short, and musical; like someone sounding out a few notes on a piano. The observation decks. A boy is standing on the observation deck; watching the chaos below. And he is laughing.

As soon as I look up, his eyes click on my face. The breath whooshes out of my body, and everything freezes for a second; as though I am looking at him through my camera lens; zoomed in all the way; the world pausing for that tiny period between the opening and closing of the shutter. His hair is golden brown; like leaves in autumn just as they are turning, and he has bright amber eyes.

The moment I see him- I know that he was one of the people responsible for this. I know that he must live in the Wilds; I know he is an invalid.

Fear clamps down on my stomach, and I open my mouth to shout something-I am not sure what; exactly-but at precisely that second, he gives a

minute shake of his head, and suddenly I cannot make a sound. Then he does the absolutely; positively unthinkable.

He winks at me...

At last, the alarm goes off. It is so loud I must cover my ears with my hands. I look down to see whether the evaluators have seen him, but they are still doing their little tabletop dance, and when I look up again; he is gone.

Step on a crack; you will break your mama's back.

Step on a stone; you will end up all alone.

Step on a stick; you are bound to get Sick. Watch where you tread; you will bring out all the dead.

-A common children's playground chant; usually accompanied by jumping rope or clapping... That night; I had the dream again.

I am at the edge of a big white cliff made from sand. The ground is unsteady. The ledge I am standing on is starting to crumble; to flake away and tumble down; down; down thousands of feet below me; into the ocean; which is whipping and snapping so hard it looks like one gigantic; frothing stew; all Whitecaps, and surging water.

I am terrified I am going to fall, but for some reason, I cannot move or back away from the edge of the cliff; even as I feel the ground shifting away from underneath me; millions of molecules rearranging themselves into space; into the wind- Any second I am going to fall.

Likewise, just before, I know that there is nothing underneath me but air-that at any split second I am going to feel the wind shrieking around me as I drop down into the water-the waves lashing underneath me open for a moment, and- I see my mother's face; pale and bloated and splotched with blue; floating just below the surface. Her eyes are open; her mouth is split apart as though she is screaming; her arms are extended on either side of her; bobbing in the current; as though she is waiting to embrace me.

That is when I woke up. That is when I always wake up.

My pillow is damp, and I have a scratchy feeling in my throat. I have been crying in my sleep. Gracie is folded next to me; one cheek squashed flat against the sheets; her mouth making endless; noiseless repetitions. She always gets into bed with me when I am having a dream.

She can sense it; somehow. I brush her hair away from her face and pull the sweat-soaked sheets away from her shoulders. I will be sorry to leave Grace when I move out.

Our secrets have made us close; bonded us together. She is the only one who knows of the Coldness- a feeling that comes sometimes when I am lying-in bed; a black; empty feeling that knocks my breath away and leaves me gasping as though I have just been thrown in the icy water.

On nights like that though; it is wrong and illegal- I think of those strange and terrible words; I love you and wonder what they would taste like in my mouth; try to recall their lilting rhythm in my mother tongue.

And of course; I keep her secret safe. I am the only one who knows that Grace is not stupid, or slow- There is nothing wrong with her at all. I am the only one who has ever heard her speak.

One night after she had come to sleep in my bed I woke up in the exceedingly early morning; the nighttime shadows ebbing off our walls. She was sobbing quietly into the pillow next to me; pronouncing the same word over and over; stuffing her mouth with blankets so I could barely hear her- 'Mommy; Mommy; Mommy.'

As though she was trying to chew her way around it; as though it was choking her in her sleep. I had put my arms around her and squeezed, and after what felt like hours; she exhausted herself on the word and fell back to sleep; the tension in her body slowly relaxing; her face hot and bloated from the tears.

That is the real reason she does not speak. All the rest of her words are crowded out by that single; looming one; a word still echoing in the dark corners of her memory.

Mommy...

I know, I remember. I sit up and watch the light strengthen the walls; listen for the sounds of the seagulls outside; take a drink from the glass of water next to my bed. Today is June 3. Ninety-five days.

I wish for Grace the cure could come sooner. I comfort myself by thinking that someday she will have the procedure too. Someday she will be saved, and the past and all its pain will be rendered as smoothly palatable as the food we spoon on our babies.

Someday we will all be saved. By the time I drag myself down to breakfast-feeling as though someone is grinding sand into both of my eyes-the official story about the incident at the labs has been released.

Carol keeps our small TV on low while she makes breakfast, and the murmur of the newscasters' voices almost puts me back to sleep.

'Yesterday a truck full of cattle intended for the slaughterhouse was mixed up with a shipment of pharmaceuticals, resulting in the hilarious and unprecedented chaos you see on your screen.' Cue- nurses squealing; swatting at lowing cows with clipboards.

This does not make any sense, but if no one mentions the Invalids, everyone is happy. We are not supposed to know about them. They are not even supposed to exist; supposedly; all the people who live in the Wilds were destroyed over fifty years ago; during the blitz.

Fifty years ago; the government closed the borders of the United States. The border is guarded constantly by military personnel. No one can get in. No one goes out. Every sanctioned and approved community must also be contained within a border, that is the law, and all travel between communities requires the official written consent of the municipal government to be obtained six months in advance. This is for our protection. Safety; Sanctity; Community- That is our country's motto. The government has been successful. We have not seen a war since the border was closed, and there is hardly any crime, except for the occasional incident of vandalism or petty theft. There is no more hatred in the United States; at least among the cured. Only sporadic cases of detachment-but every medical procedure carries a certain risk.

But so far; the government has failed to rid the country of Invalids, and it is the single blemish on the administration and the system in general. So, we do not talk about them. We pretend that the Wilds-and the people who live there- do not even exist. It is rare to hear the word even spoken; except when a suspected sympathizer disappears; or when a young diseased couple is found to have vanished together before a cure can be administered.

One piece of good news is this-

All of yesterday's evaluations have been invalidated. All of us will receive a new evaluation date, which means I get a second chance. This time I swear I am not going to screw it up. I feel completely idiotic about my meltdown at the labs.

Sitting at the breakfast table; with everything looking so clean and bright and normal-the chipped blue mugs full of coffee; the erratic beeping of the microwave (one of the few electronic devices; besides the lights; Carol allows us to use)-makes yesterday seem like a long, strange dream. It is a miracle; actually; that a bunch of fanatical Invalids decided to let loose a stampede at the exact moment I was failing the most important test of my life. I do not know what came over me. I think about Glasses showing his teeth, and the moment I heard my mouth say.

‘Gray,’ and I wince. Stupid; stupid.

Suddenly I am aware that Jenny has been talking to me.

‘What?’ I blink at Jenny as she swims into focus. I watch her hands as she cuts her toast precisely into quarters.

‘I said; what’s wrong with you?’ Back and forth; back and forth. The knife dings against the edge of the plate. ‘You look like you’re about to puke or something.’ ‘Jenny;’ Carol scolds. She is at the sink, washing dishes. ‘Not while your uncle is eating breakfast.’ ‘I’m fine.’ I rip off a piece of toast; slide it across the stick of butter that is getting melty in the middle of the table and force myself to eat. The last thing I need is a good old family-style interrogation. ‘Just tired.’ Carol turned to look at me. Her face has always reminded me of a doll’s. Even when she is talking; even when she is irritated or happy or confused; her expression stays weirdly immobile.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’

‘I slept;’ I say. ‘I just had a bad dream; that’s all.’ At the end of the table; my uncle

Krumenacker starts up from his newspaper.

‘Oh; God. You know what? You just reminded me. I had a dream last night too.’

Carol raises her eyebrows, and even Jenny looks interested. It is extremely unusual for people to dream once they have been cured. Carol once told me that on the rare occasions she still dreams; her dreams are full of dishes; stacks and stacks of them climbing toward the sky, and sometimes she climbs them; lip to lip; hauling herself up into the clouds; trying to reach the top of the stack. But it never ends; it stretches on into infinity. My sister Rachel never dreams anymore.

Krumenacker smiles; 'I was caulking the window in the bathroom. Carol; do you remember I said there was a draft the other day? Anyway; I was piping in the caulk, but every time I finished; it would just flake away like it was snow-and the wind would come in and

I would have to start all over. On and on and on for hours; it felt like.'

'How strange,' my aunt says; smiling; coming to the table with a plate of fried eggs. My uncle likes them super runny, and they sit on the plate; their yolks jiggling and quivering like hula-hoop dancers; spotted with oil. My stomach twists. Krumenacker says; 'No wonder I am so tired this morning. I was doing housework all night.'

Everyone laughs but me. I choke down another bit of toast; wondering whether I will dream once I have been cured.

I hope not.

This year is the first year since sixth grade that I do not have a single class with Hanna; so, I do not see her until after school; when we meet up in the locker room to go running; even though the cross-country season ended a couple of weeks ago.

(When the team went to Regionals it was only the third time I had ever been out of Pittsburgh, and even though we went just forty miles along the gray, bleak municipal highway; I could still hardly swallow; the butterflies in my throat were so frantic.)

Still, Hanna and I try to run together as much as we can; even during school vacations. I started running when I was six years old after my mom committed suicide. The first day I ever ran a whole mile was the day of her funeral. I had been told to stay upstairs with my cousins while my aunt prepared the house for the memorial service and laid out all the food.

Marcia and Rachel were supposed to get me ready, but in the middle of helping me dress, they had started arguing about something and had stopped paying me any attention at all. So-o I had wandered downstairs; my dress zipped halfway up my back; to ask my aunt for help. Mrs. Eisner; my aunt's neighbor at the time, was there. As I came into the kitchen she was saying; 'It is horrible; of course. But there was no hope for her anyway. It is much better this way. It is better for Lena too. Who wants a mother like that?'

I was not supposed to have heard. Mrs. Eisner gave a startled little gasp when she saw me, and her mouth shut quickly; like a cork popping back into a bottle.

My aunt just stood there, and in that second it was as though the world and the future collapsed down into a single point, and I understood that this-the kitchen; the spotless cream linoleum floors; the glaring lights, and the vivid green mass of Jell-O on the counter- was all that was left now that my mother was gone.

Suddenly, I could not stay there. I could not stand the sight of my aunt's kitchen, which I now understood would be my kitchen. I could not stand the Jell-O.

My mother hated Jell-O. An itchy feeling began to work its way through my body; as though a thousand mosquitoes were circulating through my blood; biting me from the inside; making me want to scream; jump; squirm.

I ran...

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 24

This Kiss

Hanna; one foot on a bench; is lacing up her shoes when I come in. My awful secret is that I like to run with Hanna partly because it is the single; sole; a solitary shred of a thing that I can do better than she can; but I would never admit that aloud in a million years.

I had not even had a chance to put my bag down before she leaned forward and grabbed my arm.

'Can you believe it?' She is fighting a smile, and her eyes are a pinwheel of color-blue; green; gold-flashing like they always do when she is excited about something. 'It was the Invalids. That is what everybody is saying, anyway.'

We are the only people in the locker room-all the sports teams have finished their seasons, but I instinctively whip my head around when she says the word.

'Keep your voice down.'

She pulls back a little, tossing her hair over one shoulder. 'Relax. I did recon. Even checked the toilet stalls. We are in the clear.'

I open the gym locker I have had for all my ten years at St. Anne's. At its bottom is a film of gum wrappers and shredded notes and lost paper clips, and on top of that; my small limp pile of running clothes; two pairs of shoes; my cross-country team jersey; a dozen half-used bottles of deodorant; conditioner, and perfume. In less than two weeks I will graduate and never see the inside of this locker again, and for a second, I get sad.

It is gross; but I have always loved the smell of gyms- the industrial cleaning fluid and the deodorant and soccer balls and even the lingering smell of sweat.

It is comforting to me. It is so strange how life works- You want something, and you wait and wait and feel like it is taking forever to come. Then it happens and it is over and all you want to do is curl back up at that moment before things change.

'Who is everybody; anyway? The news is saying it was just a mistake; a shipping error or something.' I feel the need to repeat the official story; even though I know just as well as Hanna that it is BS.

She straddles the bench, watching me.

As usual; she is oblivious to the fact that I hate it when other people see me change. 'Do not be an idiot. If it was on the news; it is not true. Besides, who mixes up a cow and a box of prescription meds? It is not like it is hard to tell the difference.'

I shrug. She is right; obviously. She is still looking at me; so- I angle slightly away. I have never been comfortable with my body like Hanna and some of the other girls at St. Anne's; never gotten over the awkward feeling that I have been fitted together just a little wrong in some very key places. Like I have been sketched by an amateur artist- If you do not look too closely; it is all right but start focusing and all the smudges and mistakes become obvious. Hanna kicks one leg out and begins stretching; refusing to let the issue drop.

Hanna's more fascinated with the Wilds than anyone I have ever met. 'If you think about it; it is amazing. The planning and all that. It would have taken at least four or five people-more-to coordinate everything.' I think briefly of the boy I saw on the observation deck; of his flashing autumn-leaf-colored hair, and the way he tipped his head back when he laughed so I could see the vaulted

black arch of his mouth. I told no one about him; not even Hanna, and now I feel I should have.

Hanna goes on; 'Someone must have had security codes. A sympathizer.'

A door bangs loudly at the front of the locker room, and Hanna and I both jump; staring at each other with wide eyes. Footsteps click quickly across the linoleum. After a few seconds of hesitation, Hanna launches smoothly into a safe topic- the color of the graduation gowns; which are orange this year. Just then Mrs. Jonson, the athletic director, comes around the bank of lockers, swinging her whistle around one finger.

'At least they are not brown; like at Fieldston Prep;' I say, though I am barely listening to Hanna. My heart is pounding, and I am still thinking about the boy and wondering whether Jonson heard us say the word sympathizer. She does not do anything but nod as she passes us; so, it seems unlikely.

I have learned to get good at this -say one thing when I am thinking about something else; act like I am listening when I am not; pretend to be calm and happy when really; I am freaking out. It is one of the skills you perfect as you get older. You must learn that people are always listening.

The first time I ever used the cell phone that my aunt and uncle share; I was surprised by the patchy interference that kept breaking up my conversation with Hanna at random intervals; until my aunt explained that it was just the government's listening devices; which arbitrarily cut into cell phone calls; recording them; monitoring conversations for target words like love; or Invalids; or sympathizer.

No one is targeted; it is all done randomly; to be fair. But it is almost worse than that way. I always feel as though a giant; a revolving gaze is bound to sweep over me at any second; lighting up my bad thoughts like an animal lit still and white in the ever-turning beam of a lighthouse. Sometimes as though there are two, I make, indeed, one coasting directly on top of the other- the superficial me; who nods when she is supposed to nod and says what she is supposed to say, and some other; deeper part; the part that worries, dreams, and says 'Gray.'

Most of the time they move along coordinated, and I hardly notice the split, but sometimes it feels as though I am two different people, and I could rip apart at any second. Once I confessed this to Rachel. She just smiled and told

me it would all be better after the procedure. After the procedure, she said, it would be all coasting; all glides; every day as easy as one; two; three.

‘Ready;’ I say, spinning my locker closed. We can still hear Mrs. Jonson shuffling around in the bathroom, whistling. A toilet flushes. A faucet goes on.

‘My turn to pick the route;’ Hanna says, eyes sparkling, and before I can open my mouth to protest; she lunges forward and smacks me on the shoulder.’

‘Tag- you’re it;’ she says, and just as easily spins off the bench and sprints for the door; laughing; so- I must run to catch up.

Earlier in the day, it rained, and the storm cooled everything off. Water evaporates from puddles in the streets, leaving a shimmering layer of mist over Pittsburgh. Above us; the sky is now a vivid blue. The bay is flat and silver; the coast is like a giant belt cinched around it; keeping it in place.

I do not ask Hanna where she is going, but it does not surprise me when she starts winding us toward Old Port; toward the old footpath that runs along Commercial Street and up to the labs.

We try to keep on the smaller; less-trafficked streets, but it is a losing game. It is three-thirty. All the schools have been released, and the streets surge with students walking home. A few buses rumble past, and one or two cars squeeze by. Cars are considered good luck. As they pass, people reach out their hands and brush along with the shiny hoods; the clean, bright windows; which will soon be smudged with fingerprints. Hanna and I run next to each other; reviewing all the day’s gossip. We do not talk about the botched evaluations yesterday, or the rumors of the Invalids.

There are too many people around. Instead, she tells me about her ethics exam, and I tell her about Cora Dervish’s fight with Minna Wilkinson. We talk about Willow Marks; too; who has been absent from school since the previous Wednesday. Rumor is that Willow was found by regulators last week in Deering Oaks Park after curfew -with a boy.

We have been hearing rumors like that about Willow for years. She is just the kind of person people talk about. She has blond hair, but she is always coloring different streaks into it with markers, and I remember once on a first-year class trip to a museum; we passed a group of Spencer Prep boys and she said; so loud one of our chaperones could have easily heard; ‘I’d like to kiss one of them straight on the lips.’ She was caught hanging out with a boy in tenth grade and got off with a warning because she showed no signs of deliria.

Every so often people make mistakes; it is biological; a result of the same chemical and hormonal imbalances that occasionally lead to Unnaturalism; to boys being attracted to children to girls. These impulses will be resolved by the cure. But this time it is serious, and Hanna drops the bomb just as we turn onto Center- Mr. and Mrs. Marks have agreed to move the date of Willow's procedure up by a full six months. She will be missing graduation day to get cured.

'Six months?' I repeat. We have been running hard for twenty minutes; so- I am not sure if the heavy thumping in my chest is a result of the exercise or the news. I am feeling more out of breath than I should be like someone is sitting on my chest. 'Isn't that dangerous?' Hanna tips her head to the right; gesturing the way to a shortcut through an alley. 'It's been done before.'

'Yeah; but not successfully. What about all the side effects? Mental problems? Blindness?' There are a few reasons why scientists will not let anyone under the age of eighteen have the procedure, but the biggest one is that it just does not seem to work as well for people younger than that, and in the worst cases it has been known to cause all crazy difficulties. Scientists speculate that the brain and its neuropathways are still too plastic before then; still in the middle of forming themselves. The older you are when you have the procedure; the better; but most people are scheduled for the procedure as close as possible to their eighteenth birthday.

'They think it's worth the risk;'

Hanna says. 'Better than the alternative; you know? Amor deliria Nervosa. The deadliest of all deadly things.' This is the catchphrase that is written on every mental health pamphlet ever written about deliria; Hanna's voice is flat as she repeats it, and it makes my stomach dip. All of yesterday's craziness has made me forget Hanna's comment to me before the evaluations. But now I remember and remember how strange she looked too, eyes cloudy and unreadable.

'Come on.' I feel a strain in my lungs and my left thigh is starting to cramp. The only way to push through it is to run harder and faster. 'Let us pick it up; Slug.'

'Bring it.' Hanna's face splits into a grin, and both of us start pumping faster. The pain in my lungs swells up and blossoms until it feels like it is everywhere, tearing through all my cells and muscles at once. The cramp in my leg makes me wince every time my heel hits the pavement. It is always like this

on miles two and three; like all the stress, anxiety, irritation, and fear get transformed into little needling points of physical pain, and you cannot breathe or imagine going farther or thinking anything, but I cannot. I cannot. I cannot.

And then, just as suddenly, it is gone. All the pain lifts away; the cramp vanishes; the first ease off my chest, and I can breathe easily. Instantly a feeling of total happiness bubbles up inside of me- the solid feeling of the ground underneath me; the simplicity of the movement; rocketing off my heels; pushing forward in time and space; total freedom and release. I glance over at Hanna. I can tell from her expression that she is feeling it too. She made it through the wall. She senses me looking and whipping around; her blond ponytail a bright arc; to give me the thumbs-up.

It is strange. When we run, I feel closer to Hanna than at any other time. Even when we are not talking; it is like there is an invisible cord tethering us together; matching our rhythms; our arms and our legs as though we are both responding to the same drumbeat.

For my sister, Karly- Han's girl is forever I like to save things. Not important things like whales or people or the environment. Silly things. Porcelain bells: the kind you get at souvenir shops. Cookie cutters you will never use because who needs a cookie in the shape of a foot? Ribbons for my hair.

Love letters. Of all the things I save, I guess you could say my love letters are my most prized possession. I keep my letters in a teal hatbox my mom bought me from a vintage store downtown.

They do not love letters that someone else wrote for me; I do not have any of those. These are the ones I have written. There is one for every boy I've ever loved- five in all.

When I write, I hold nothing back. I write as he will never read it. Because he never will.

Every secret thought; every careful observation; everything I have saved up inside me; I put it all in the letter. When I am done, I seal it, address it, and then put it in my teal hatbox.

They do not love letters in the strictest sense of the word. My letters are for when I do not want to be in love anymore. They are for goodbye. Because after I write my letter; I am no longer consumed by my all-consuming love. I can eat my cereal and not wonder if he likes bananas over his Cheerios too; I can sing along to love songs and not be singing them to him. If love is like a

possession; my letters are like my exorcisms. My letters set me free. Or at least they are supposed to.

JOSH IS MARGOT'S BOYFRIEND; BU IT guess you could say my whole family is a little in love with him. It is hard to say who most of all. Before he was Margot's boyfriend; he was just Josh. He was always there. I say always, but that is not true. He moved next door five years ago, but it feels like always.

My dad loves Josh because he is a boy, and my dad is surrounded by girls. I mean it- all day long he is surrounded by females. My dad is an ob-gyn, and he also happens to be the father of three daughters; so, it is like girls; girls; girls all day. He also likes Josh because Josh likes comics and he will go fishing with him. My dad tried to take us fishing once, and I cried when my shoes got mud on them, Margot cried when her book got wet, and Kellie cried because Kellie was still a baby.

Kellie loves Josh because he will play cards with her and not get bored. Or at least pretend to not get bored. They make deals with each other- if I win this next hand; you must make me a toasted crunchy-peanut-butter-sandwich; no crusts.

That is Kellie...

Inevitably there will not be crunchy peanut butter and Josh will say too bad; pick something else. But then Kellie will wear him down and he will run out and buy some because that's Josh.

If I had to say why Margot loves him; I think I would say it is because we all do.

We are in the living room; Kellie is posting pictures of dogs on a giant piece of cardboard. There are paper and scraps all around her. Humming to herself; she says, 'When Daddy asks me what I want for Christmas; I am just going to say; 'Pick any one of these breeds and we'll be good.' 'Margot and Josh are on the couch; I am lying on the floor; watching TV. Josh popped a big bowl of popcorn, and I devoted myself to it; handfuls and handfuls of it.

A commercial comes on for perfume- a girl is running around the streets of- Paris in an orchid-colored halter dress that is thin as tissue paper. What I would not give to be; the girl in that tissue-paper dress running around Paris in springtime! I sit up so-o suddenly; I choke on a kernel of popcorn. Between coughs I say, 'Margot; let us meet in Paris for my spring break!' I am already

picturing myself twirling with a pistachio macaron in one hand and a raspberry one in the other.

Margot's eyes light up. 'Do you think Daddy will let you?'

'Sure; it is culture. He will have to let me.' But, indeed, I have never flown by myself before. And I have never even left the country before. Would Margot meet me at the airport; or would I have to find my way to the hostel?

Josh must see the sudden worry on my face because he says, 'Do not worry.'

Your dad will let you go if I am with you.'

I brighten. 'Yeah! We can stay at hostels and just eat pastries and cheese for all our meals.'

'We can go to Jim Morrison's grave!' Josh throws in.

'We can go to a perfumeries' and get our scents done!' I cheer, and Josh snorts.

'Um; I am quite sure 'getting our scents done,' at some perfumery' would cost the same as a week's stay at the hostel;' he says. He nudges Margot. 'Your sister suffers from delusions of grandeur.'

'She is the fanciest of the three of us;' Margot agrees.

'What about me?' Kellie whimpers.

'You?' I scoff. 'You are the least fancy Song girl. I must beg you to wash your feet at night; much less take a shower.'

Kellie's face gets pinched and red. 'I was not talking about that; you dodo bird. I was talking about Paris.'

Airily, I wave her off. 'You're too little to stay at a hostel.'

She crawls over to Margot and climbs in her lap; even though she is nine and nine is too big to sit in people's laps. 'Margot; you'll let me go; won't you?'

'Maybe it could be a family vacation;' Margot says, kissing her cheek. 'You and Lara Jean and Daddy could all come.'

I frown... That is not at all the Paris trip I was imagining. Over Kellie's head Josh mouths to me, we will talk later, and I give him a discreet thumbs-up.

It is later that night; Josh is long gone. Kellie and our dad are asleep. We are in the kitchen. Margot is at the table on her computer; I am sitting next to her; rolling cookie dough into balls and dropping them in cinnamon and sugar. Snickerdoodles to get back in Kellie's good graces. Earlier, when I went in to say good night, Kellie rolled over and would not speak to me because she is still convinced; I am going to try to cut her out of the Paris trip.

I plan to put the snickerdoodles on a plate right next to her pillow, so she wakes up to the smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Margot's being extra quiet, and then; out of nowhere; she looks up from her computer and says, 'I broke up with Josh tonight. After dinner.'

My cookie-dough ball fell out of my fingers and into the sugar bowl.

'I mean; it was time;' she says. Her eyes are not red-rimmed; she has not been crying; I do not think. Her voice is calm and even. Anyone looking at her would think she was fine.

Because Margot is always fine; even when she is not.

'I don't see why you had to break up;' I say. 'Just cause you're going to college doesn't mean you have to break up.'

'Lara Jean; I am going to Scotland; not UVA. Saint Andrews is four thousand miles away.' She pushes up her glasses. 'What would be the point?'

I cannot even believe she would say that. 'The point is it's Josh. Josh who loves you more than any boy has ever loved a girl!'

Margot rolls her eyes at this. She thinks I am being dramatic, but I am not. It is true; that is how much Josh loves Margot. He would never so much as look at another girl.

Suddenly she says, 'Do you know what Mommy told me once?'

'What?' For a moment, I forget all about Josh. Because no matter what I am doing in life; if Margot and I are in the middle of an argument; or if I am about to get hit by a car; I will always stop and listen to a story about Mommy.

Any detail; any remembrance that Margot has; I want to have it too. I am better off than Kellie; though. Kellie does not have one memory of Mommy that we have not given her. We have told her so many stories so many times that they are hers now. 'Remember that time-;' she will say. And then she will tell the story like she was there and not just a baby.

‘She told me to try not to go to college with a boyfriend. She said she did not want me to be the girl crying on the phone with her boyfriend and saying no to things instead of yes.’

Scotland is Margot’s; yes; I guess. Absently, I scoop up a mound of cookie dough and pop it into my mouth.

‘You shouldn’t eat raw cookie dough,’ Margot says.

I ignore her. ‘Josh would never hold you back from anything. He is not like that.

Remember how when you decided to run for student body president; he was your campaign manager? He is your biggest fan!‘

At this, the corners of Margot’s mouth turn down, and I get up and fling my arms around her neck. She leans her head back and smiles up at me. ‘I’m okay,’ she says, but she is not I know she is not.

‘It is not too late; you know. You can go over there right now and tell him you changed your mind.’

Margot shakes her head. ‘It’s done; Lara Jean.’ I release her and she closes her laptop. ‘When will the first batch be ready? I am hungry.’

I look at the magnetic egg timer on the fridge. ‘Four more minutes.’ I sit back down and say, ‘I do not care what you say, Margot. You guys are not done. You love him so much.’

She shakes her head. ‘Lara Jean;’ she begins; in her patient Margot’s voice; like I am a child, and she is a wise old woman of forty-two.

I wave a spoonful of cookie dough under Margot’s nose, and she hesitates and then opens her mouth. I feed it to her like a baby. ‘Wait and see; you and Josh will be back together in a day; maybe two.’ But even as I am saying it; I know it is not true. Margot’s not the kind of girl to break up and get back together on a whim; once she has decided something; that is, it. There is no waffling, no regrets. It is like she said- when she has done; she has just done.

I wish (and this is a thought I have had many; many times; too many times to count) I was more like Margot. Because sometimes it feels like I will never be done.

Later, after I have washed the dishes, plated the cookies, and set them on Kellie's pillow; I go to my room. I do not turn the light on. I go to my window. Josh's light is still on.

THE NEXT MORNING: MARGOT making coffee and I am pouring cereal into bowls, and I say the thing I have been thinking all morning. 'Just so you know; Daddy and Kellie are going to be upset.' When Kellie and I were brushing our teeth just now; I was tempted to go ahead and disclose information, but Kellie was still mad at me from yesterday; so- I kept quiet. She did not even acknowledge my cookies; though I know she ate them because all that was left on the plate were crumbs.

Margot lets out a heavy sigh. 'So; I'm supposed to stay with Josh because of you and Daddy and Kellie?'

'No; I'm just telling you.'

'It's not like he would come over here that much once I was gone; anyway.'

I frown... This did not occur to me; Josh would stop coming over because Margot was gone. He was coming over long before they were ever a couple; so- I do not see why he should stop. 'He might;' I say. 'He loves Kellie.'

She pushes the start button on the coffee machine. I am watching her super carefully because Margot's always been the one to make the coffee and I never have, and now that she is leaving (only six more days); I would be better knowledgeable. With her back to me, she says, 'Maybe I won't even mention it to them.'

'Um; I think they'll figure it out when he's not at the airport; Gogo.' Gogo is my nickname for Margot. As in go-go boots. 'How many cups of water did you put in there?'

And how many spoons of coffee beans?'

'I'll write it all down for you;' Margot assures me. 'In the notebook.'

We keep a house notebook by the fridge. Margot's idea; of course. It has all the important numbers and Daddy's schedule and Kellie's Caceool. 'Make sure you put in the number for the new dry cleaners;' I say.

'Already done.' Margot slices a banana for her cereal- each slice is perfectly thin. 'And also; Josh would not have come to the airport with us

anyway. You know how I feel; about sad good-byes.' Margot makes a face; like Ugh; emotions.

I do know.

When Margot decided to go to college in Scotland; it felt like a betrayal.

Even though I knew it was coming because of course; she was going to go to college somewhere far away. And of course; she was going to go to college in Scotland and study anthropology; because she is Margot; the girl with the maps and the travel books and the plans. Of course, she would leave us one day.

I am still mad at her; just a little. Just a teeny-tiny bit. I know it is not her fault. But she is going so far away, and we always said we would be the Song girls forever.

Margot first; I in the middle and my sister Kellie last. On her birth certificate, she is Katherine; to us she is Kellie. Occasionally we call her Kitten because that is what I called her when she was born- she looked like a scrawny, hairless kitten.

We are the three Song girls. There used to be four. My mom; Eve Song. Evie to my dad; Mommy to us; Eve to everyone else. The song was my mom's last name. Our last name is Covey- Covey is like a lovey, not like a cove. But the reason we are the Song girls and not the Covey girls is my mom used to say that she was a Song girl for life, and Margot said then we should be too. We all have Song for our middle name, and we look more Song than Covey anyway; more Korean than white. At least Margot and I do; Kellie looks most like Daddy- her hair is light brown like this. People say I look the most like Mommy, but Margot does, with her high cheekbones and dark eyes. It has been six years now, and sometimes it feels like just yesterday she was here, and sometimes it feels like she never was only in dreams.

She had mopped the floors that morning; they were shiny, and everything smelled like lemons and a clean house. The phone was ringing in the kitchen; she came running in to answer it, and she slipped. She hit her head on the floor, and she was unconscious; but then she woke up and she was fine. That was her lucid interval. That is what they call it. A little while later she said she had a headache; she went to lie down on the couch, and then she did not wake up.

Margot was the one who found her. She was twelve. She took care of everything- she called 911; she called Daddy; she told me to watch over Kellie; who was only three. I turned on the TV for Kellie in the playroom and I sat with her. That is all I did. I do not know what I would have done if Margot had not been there. Even though Margot is only two years older than me; I look up to her more than anybody.

When other adults find out that my dad is a single parent of three girls, they shake their heads in admiration; like How does he do it? How does he ever manage that all by himself? The answer is Margot. She has been an organizer from the start; everything is labeled, scheduled, and arranged neatly; even rows. Margot is a good girl, and I guess Kellie and I have followed her lead. I have never cheated or gotten drunk or smoked a cigarette or even had a boyfriend.

We tease Daddy and say how lucky he is that we are all so good, but the truth is; we are the lucky ones. He is a good dad. And he tries hard. He does not always understand us, but he tries, and that is the important thing. We three Song girls have an unspoken pact- to make life as easy as possible for Daddy. But then again; it is not so unspoken; because how many times have; I heard Margot say, 'Shh; be quiet; Daddy's taking a nap before he has to go back to the hospital;' or 'Don't bother Daddy with that; do it yourself?'

I have asked Margot what she thinks it would have been like if Mommy had not died. Like would we spend more time with our Korean side of the family and not just on- Thanksgiving and New Year's Day? Or- Margot does not see the point in wondering. This is our life; there is no use in asking what if. No one could ever give you the answers. I try; I do, but it is hard for me to accept this way of thinking. I am always wondering about the what ifs; about the road not taken.

Daddy and Kellie come downstairs at the same time. Margot pours Daddy a cup of coffee; black, and I pour milk into Kellie's cereal bowl. I push it in front of her, and she turns her head away from me and gets yogurt out of the fridge. She takes it into the living room to eat in front of the TV. So, she is still mad.

'I'm going to go to Costco later today; so- you girls make a list of whatever you need;'

Daddy asks, taking a big sip of coffee. 'I think I will pick up some New York strips for dinner.

We can grill it out. Should I get one for Josh; too?’

My head whips in Margot’s direction. She opens her mouth and closes it.

Then she says, ‘No; just get enough for the four of us; Daddy.’

I give her a reprobating look, and she ignores me. I have never known Margot to chicken out before, but I suppose in matters of the heart; there is no predicting how a person will or will not behave.

SO NOW IT’S THE LAS Todays of summer and our last days with Margot.

It is not altogether such a dreadful thing that she broke up with Josh; this way we have more time with just us sisters. I am sure she must have thought of that. I am sure it was part of the plan.

We are driving out of our neighborhood when we see Josh run past. He joined track last year; so now he is always running. Kellie yells his name, but the windows are up, and it is no use anyway- he pretends not to hear. ‘Turn around,’ Kellie urges Margot.

‘Maybe he wants to come with us.’

‘This is a Song-girls-only day,’ I tell her.

We spent the rest of the morning at Target; picking up last-minute things like Honey Nut Chex mix for the flight and deodorant and hair ties. We let Kellie push the cart so she can do that thing where she gets a running start and then rides the cart like; she is pushing a chariot. Margot only lets her do it a couple of times before she makes her stop; though; so as not to annoy other customers.

Next, we go back home and make chicken salad with green grapes for lunch and then it is time for Kellie’s swim meet. We pack a picnic dinner of ham-and-cheese sandwiches and fruit salad and bring Margot’s laptop to watch movies on because swim meets can go long into the night. We make a sign; too; that says Go Kellie Go!

I drew a dog on it. Daddy ends up missing the swim meet because he is delivering a baby, and as far as excuses go; it is a surprisingly good one. (It was a girl, and they named her Patricia Rose after her two grandmothers. Daddy always finds out the first and middle names for me. It is the first thing I ask when he gets home from delivery.)

Kellie's so excited about winning two first-place ribbons and one-second place that she forgets to ask where Josh is until we are in the car driving back home. She is in the backseat, and she has her towel wrapped around her head like a turban and her ribbons dangling from her ears like earrings. She leans forward and says, 'Hey! Why did not Josh come to my meeting?'

I can see Margot hesitate; so- I answer before she can. The only thing I am better at than Margot is lying. 'He had to work at the bookstore tonight. He wanted to make it; though.' Margot reaches across the console and gives my hand a grateful squeeze.

Sticking out her lower lip; Kellie says, 'That was the last regular meet! He promised he had come to watch me swim.'

'It was a last-minute thing;' I say. 'He couldn't get out of working the shift because one of his coworkers had an emergency.'

Kellie nods begrudgingly. Little as she is; she understands emergency shifts.

'Let us get frozen custards,' Margot says suddenly.

Kellie lights up, and Josh and his imaginary emergency shift are forgotten.

'Yeah! I want a waffle cone! Can I get a waffle cone with two scoops? I want mint chips and peanut brittle. No; rainbow sherbet and double fudge. No; wait...'

I twist around in my seat. 'You can't finish two scoops and a waffle cone,' I tell her.

'Maybe you could finish two scoops in a cup; but not in a cone.'

'Yes; I can... Tonight I can. I am starving.'

'Fine; but you better finish the whole thing.' I shake my finger at her and say it like a threat, which makes her roll her eyes and giggle. As for me, I will get what I always get; the cherry chocolate chunk custard in a sugar cone.

Margot pulls into the drive-thru, and as we wait our turn; I say; 'I bet they don't have frozen custard in Scotland.'

'Probably not,' she says.

'You won't have another one of these until Thanksgiving;' I say.

Margot looks straight ahead. 'Christmas;' she says, correcting me.

'Thanksgiving's too short to fly all that way; remember?'

'Thanksgiving's going to suck.' Kellie pouts.

I am silent. We have never had Thanksgiving without Margot. She always does the turkey and the broccoli casserole and the creamed onions. I make pies (pumpkin and pecan) and mashed potatoes. Kellie is the taste tester and the table-setter. I do not know how to roast a turkey. And both of our grandmothers will be there, and Nana, Daddy's mother, likes Margot best of all of us. She says Kellie drains her and I am too dreamy-eyed.

Suddenly, I felt panicky, and it was hard to breathe, and I could not care less about cherry chocolate chunk custard. I cannot picture Thanksgiving without Margot. I cannot even picture next Monday without her.

I know most sisters do not get along, but I am closer to Margot than I am to anybody in the world. How can we be the Song girls without Margot?

MY OLDEST FRIEND CHRIS SMOKE- She hooks up with boys she does know hardly at all, and she has been suspended twice. One time she had to go to court for truancy.

I never knew what truancy was before I met Chris. FYI: it is when you skip school so much; you are in trouble with the law.

I am quite sure that if Chris and I met each other now, we would not be friends. We are as different as can be. But it was not always this way. In sixth grade, Chris liked stationery and sleepovers, and staying up all night watching John Hughes movies; just like me. But by eighth grade; she was sneaking out after my dad fell asleep to meet boys she met at the mall. They would drop her back off before it got light outside. I would stay up until she came back; terrified she would not make it home before my dad woke up. She always made it back in time though.

Chris is not the kind of friend you call every night or have lunch with every day. She is like a street cat; she comes and goes as she pleases. She cannot be tied down to a place or a person. Sometimes I will not see Chris for days and then in the middle of the night there will be a knock at my bedroom window, and it will be Chris; crouched in the magnolia tree. I keep my window unlocked for her in case. Chris and Margot cannot stand each other. Chris thinks

Margot is nervous, and Margot thinks Chris is bipolar. She thinks Chris uses me; Chris thinks Margot controls me. They are both a little bit right.

But the important thing, the real thing, is Chris and I understand each other; which I think counts for a lot more than people realize.

Chris calls me on the way over to our house; she says her mom's being a beotch and she is coming over for a couple of hours do we have any food?

Continued

Chris and I are sharing a bowl of leftover gnocchi in the living room when Margot comes home from dropping Kellie off at her swim team's end-of-season barbecue. 'Oh; hey;' she says. Then she spots Chris's glass of Diet Coke on the coffee table, sans coaster. 'Can you please use a coaster?'

As soon as Margot's up the stairs, Chris says, 'Gawd! Why is your sister such a botch?'

I slid a coaster under her glass. 'You think everyone's a be-otch today.'

'That's because everyone is.' Chris rolls her eyes toward the ceiling.

Loudly, she says, 'She needs to pull that stick out of her ass.'

From her room Margot yells; 'I heard that!'

'I meant for you too!' Chris yells back; scraping up the last piece of gnocchi for herself.

I sigh. 'She's leaving so soon.'

Snickering; Chris says, 'So is Joshy; like; going to light a candle for her every night until she comes back home?'

I hesitate. While I am not sure if it is still supposed to be a secret, I am sure that Margot would not want Chris to know about any of her business. All I say is 'I'm not sure.'

'Wait a minute. Did she dump him?' Chris demands.

Reluctantly I nod. 'Don't say anything to her; though;' I warn. 'She's still really sad about it.'

'Margot? Sad?' Chris picks at her nails. 'Margot doesn't have normal human emotions like the rest of us.'

‘You just don’t know her;’ I say. ‘Besides; we can’t all be like you.’

She grins a toothy grin. She has sharp incisors, which make her always look a little bit hungry. ‘True.’

Chris is pure emotion. She screams at the drop of a hat. She says sometimes you must scream out emotions; if you do not; they will fester. The other day she screamed at a lady at the grocery store for accidentally stepping on her toes. I do not think she is in any danger of her emotions festering.

‘I just can’t believe that in a few days she’ll be gone;’ I say, feeling sniffly suddenly.

‘She is not dying; Lara Jean. There is nothing to get all boo-hoo about.’ Chris pulls at a loose string on her red shorts. They are so short that when she is sitting, you can see her underwear. Which are red to match her shorts. ‘In fact; this is good for you. It is about time you did your own thing and stopped just listening to whatever Queen Margot says. This is your junior year; beotch. This is when it is supposed to get good. French some guys; live a little; you know?’

‘I live plenty,’ I say.

‘Yeah; at the nursing home.’ Chris snickers and I glare at her.

Margot started volunteering at the Bellevue Retirement Community when she got her driver’s license; it was her job to help host cocktail hour for the residents. I would help sometimes. We had set out peanuts and pour drinks and sometimes Margot would play the piano, but usually Stormy hogged that. Stormy is the Bellevue diva. She rules the roost.

I like listening to her stories. And Miss Mary might not be so good at conversation due to her dementia, but she taught me how to knit.

They have a new volunteer there now, but I know that at Bellevue it is merrier, because most of the residents get so few visitors. I should go back soon; I miss going there. And I for sure do not appreciate Chris making fun of it.

‘Those people at Bellevue have lived more life than everyone we know combined;’ I tell her. ‘There is this one lady; Stormy; she was a USO girl! She used to get a hundred letters a day from soldiers who were in love with her. And there was this one veteran who lost his leg; he sent her a diamond ring!’

Chris looks interested suddenly. ‘Did she keep it?’

‘She did;’ I admit. It was wrong of her to keep the ring since she had no intention of marrying him, but she showed it to me, and it was beautiful. It was a pink diamond; exceedingly rare. I bet it is worth so much money now.

‘I guess Stormy sounds kind of like a badass;’ Chris says begrudgingly.

‘Maybe you could come with me to Bellevue sometime;’ I suggest. ‘We could go to their cocktail hour. Mr. Perelli loves to dance with new girls. He will teach you how to foxtrot.’

Chris makes a horrible face like I suggested we go hang out at the town dump. ‘No; thanks. How about I take you dancing?’ She nudges her chin upstairs. ‘Now that your sister’s left; we can have some real fun. You know I always have fun.’

It is true; Chris does always have fun. Sometimes a little too much fun; but fun, nonetheless.

THE NIGHT BEFORE MARGOT LEAVE; Sall three of us are in her room helping pack up the last unimportant things. Kellie is organizing Margot’s bath stuff, packing it nicely and neatly in the clear shower caddy. Margot is trying to decide which coat to bring.

‘Should I bring my pea-coat and my puffy coat or just my pea-coat?’ She asks me.

‘Just the pea coat;’ I say. ‘You can dress that up or down.’ I am lying on her bed directing the packing process. ‘Kellie; make sure the lotion cap is on tight.’

‘It’s brand-new- course it’s on tight!’ Kellie growls, but she double-checks.

‘It gets cold in Scotland sooner than it does here;’ Margot said, folding the coat and setting it on top of her suitcase. ‘I think I’ll just bring both.’

‘I don’t know why you asked if you already knew what you were going to do;’ I say.

‘Also; I thought you said you were coming home for Christmas. You are still coming home for Christmas, right?’

‘Yes; if you’ll stop being a brat;’ Margot says.

Honestly, Margot is not even packing that much. She does not need a lot. If it were me, I would have packed up my whole room; but not Margot. Her room looks the same;

Margot sits down next to me, and Kellie climbs up and sits at the foot of the bed.

‘Everything’s changing,’ I say, sighing.

Margot makes a face and puts her arm around me. ‘Nothing is changing; not really.

We are the Song girls forever; remember?’

Our father stands in the doorway. He knocks; even though the door is open, and we can see it is him. ‘I’m going to start packing up the car now;’ he announces. We watch from the bed as he lugs one of the suitcases downstairs, and then he comes up for the other one. Daily he says, ‘Oh no; do not get up. Do not trouble yourselves.’

‘Don’t worry; we won’t;’ we sing out.

For the past week, our father has been in spring-cleaning mode; even though it is not spring. He is getting rid of everything- the bread machine we never used; CDs; old blankets; our mother’s old typewriter. It is all going to be Goodwill. A psychiatrist or someone could connect it to Margot’s leaving for college, but I cannot explain the exact significance of it. Whatever it is, it is annoying. I had to shoo him away from my glass- unicorn collection twice.

I lay down my head in Margot’s lap. ‘So; you are coming home for Christmas; right?’

‘Right...’

‘I wish I could come with you.’ Kellie pouts. ‘You’re nicer than Lara Jean.’

I give her a pinch. ‘See?’ she crows.

‘Lara Jean will be nice,’ Margot says, ‘if you behave. And you both must take care of Daddy. Make sure he does not work too many Saturdays. Make sure he takes the car in for inspection next month. And make sure you buy coffee filters; you are always forgetting to buy coffee filters.’

‘Yes; drill sergeant;’ Kellie and I chorus. I search Margot’s face for sadness or fear or worry; for some sign that she is scared to go so far away; that she will miss us as much as we will miss her. I do not see it; though.

The three of us slept in Margot’s room that night.

Kellie falls asleep first; as always. I lie in the dark beside her with my eyes open. I cannot sleep. The thought that tomorrow night Margot will not be in this room- it makes me so sad I can hardly bear it.

I hate to change more than anything.

In the dark next to me, Margot asks; ‘Lara Jean - do you think you have ever been in love before? Real love?’

She catches me off guard; I do not have an answer ready for her. I am trying to think of one, but she is already talking again.

Wistfully, she says, ‘I wish I had been in love more than once. I think you should fall in love at least twice in high school.’ Then she lets out a little sigh and falls asleep. Margot falls asleep like that- one dreamy sigh, and she is off to never-never land: just like that.

I wake up in the middle of the night and Margot’s not there. Kellie’s curled up on her side next to me, but not Margot. It is pitch- dark- out, and only the moonlight filters through the curtains.

I crawl out of bed and move to the window. My breath catches. There they are Josh and Margot, standing in the driveway. Margot’s face is turned away from him, toward the moon. Josh is crying. They are not touching. There is enough space between them for me to know that Margot has not changed her mind.

I drop the curtain and find my way back to the bed, where Kellie has rolled farther into the center. I push her back a few inches so there will be room for Margot. I wish I had not seen that. It was too personal. Too real, it was supposed to be just for them.

If there was a way for me to un-see it; I would.

I turn on my side and close my eyes. What must it be like; to have a boy like you so much he cries for you? And not just any boy. Josh. Our Josh.

To answer her question- yes; I think I have been in real love. Just once, though. With Josh. Our Josh.... Um maybe...

THIS IS HOW MARGOT AND Josh got together. In a way, I heard about it from Josh first.

It was two years ago. We were sitting in the library during our free time. I was doing the math-

homework: Josh was helping because he is good at math. We had our heads bent over my page; so close I could smell the soap he had used that morning. Irish Spring.

And then he said, 'I need your advice on something. I like someone.'

For a split second, I thought it was me. I thought he was going to say to me. I hoped. It was the start of the school year. We had spent time together every day that August; sometimes with Margot but mostly just by ourselves because Margot had her internship at the Montpelier plantation three days a week. We swam a lot. I had a great tan from all the swimming. So-o for that split-second I thought he was going to say my name.

But then I saw the way he blushed; the way he looked off into space, and I knew it was not for me.

Mentally, I ran through the list of girls it could be. It was a shortlist. Josh did not hang out with a ton of girls; he had his best friend Jersey Mike; who had moved from New Jersey in middle school, and his other best friend; Ben, and that was it.

It could have been Ashley; a junior on the volleyball team. He had once pointed her out as the cutest of all the junior girls. In Josh's defense, I had made him do it- I asked him who was the prettiest girl in each grade. For the prettiest first-year student; my grade; he said, Genevieve.

Not that I was surprised; but it still gave me a little pinch in my heart.

It could have been Jodie; the college girl from the bookstore. Josh often talked about how smart Jodie was; how she was so cultured because she had studied abroad in India and was now Buddhist. Ha! I was the one who was half-Korean; I was the one who had taught Josh how to eat with chopsticks. He had had kimchi for the first time at my house.

I was about to ask him when the librarian came over to shush us, and then we went back to doing work Josh did not bring it up again and I did not ask.

Honestly, I did not want to know. It was not me, and that was all I cared about.

I did not think for one second that the girl he liked was Margot. Not that I did not see her as a girl who could be liked. She had been asked out before, by a certain type of guy. Smart guys who would partner up with her in chemistry and run against her for student government. In retrospect, it was not so surprising that Josh would like Margot since he is that kind of guy too.

If someone were to ask me what Josh looks like; I would say he is just ordinary. He looks like the kind of guy you would expect would be good at computers; the kind of guy who calls comic books graphic novels. Brown hair. Not a special brown; only regular brown.

Green eyes that go muddy in the center. He is on the skinny side, but he is strong. I know because I sprained my ankle once by the old baseball field and he piggybacked me all the way home. He has freckles, which make him look younger than his age. And a dimple on his left cheek. I have always liked that dimple. He has such a serious face otherwise.

What was surprising, what was shocking, was that Margot would like him back. Not because of who Josh was; but because of who Margot was. I had never heard her talk about liking a boy before; not even once. I was the flighty one; the flibbertigibbet as my white grandma would say. Not Margot. Margot was above all that. She existed on some higher plane where those things- boys; makeup; clothes- did not matter.

The way it happened was sudden. Margot came home from school late that day in October; her cheeks were pink from the cold mountain air, and she had her hair in a braid and a scarf around her neck. She had been working on a project at school; it was dinnertime, and I had cooked chicken parmesan with thin spaghetti in watery tomato sauce.

She came into the kitchen and announced; 'I have something to tell you.'

Her eyes were very bright; I remember she was unspooling the scarf from around her neck.

Kellie was doing her homework at the kitchen table; Daddy was on his way home, and I was stirring the watery sauce. 'What?' Kellie and I asked.

‘Josh likes me.’ Margot gave a pleasing kind of shrug; her shoulders nearly went up to her ears.

I went very still. Then I dropped my wooden spoon into the sauce. ‘Josh-Josh? Our Josh?’ I could not even look at her. I was afraid that she would see.

‘Yes. He waited for me after school today; so, he could tell me. He said-’

Margot grinned ruefully. ‘He said I am his dream girl. Can you believe that?’

‘Wow;’ I said, and I tried to communicate happiness in that word, but I do not know if it came out that way. All I was feeling was despair. And envy. Envy so thick and so black I; felt like I was choking on it. So-o; I tried again; this time with a smile. ‘Wow; Margot.’

‘Wow;’ Kellie echoed. ‘So-o; are you; boyfriend and girlfriend; now?’

I held my breath, waiting for her to answer.

Margot took a pinch of parmesan between her fingers and dropped it in her mouth.

‘Yeah; I think so.’ And then she smiled, and her eyes went all soft and liquid. I understood then that she liked him too. So much.

That night I wrote my letter to Josh.

Dear Josh -

I cried a lot. Just like that, it was over. It was over before I even had a chance. The important thing was not that Josh had chosen Margot. It was that Margot had chosen him.

So, that was that. I cried my eyes out; I wrote my letter; I put the whole thing to rest. I have not thought of him that way since. He and Margot are meant to be.

They are MFEO.

Made for each other.

I am still awake when Margot comes back to bed, but I quickly shut my eyes and pretend to be asleep. Kellie cuddled up next to me.

I hear a sniffly sound, and I peek out of one eye to look at Margot. Her back is to us; her shoulders are shaking. She is crying.

Margot never cries...

Now that I have seen Margot cry over him; I believe it more than ever- they are not over.

THE NEXT DAY: WE DRIVE from Margot to the airport. Outside, we load up her suitcases on a luggage carrier- Kellie tries to get on top and dance, but our father pulls her down right away. Margot insists on going in by herself; just like she said she would.

‘Margot; at least let me get your bags checked;’ Daddy says, trying to maneuver the luggage carrier around her. ‘I want to see you go through security.’

‘I’ll be fine;’ she repeats. ‘I have flown by myself before. I know how to check a bag.’

She stretches up on her toes and puts her arms around our dad’s shoulders.

‘I’ll call as soon as I get there; I promise.’

‘Call every day;’ I whisper. The lump in my throat is getting bigger, and a few tears leak out of my eyes. I had hoped I would not cry because I knew Margot would not, and it is lonely to cry alone, but I cannot help it.

‘Don’t you dare forget us;’ Kellie warns.

That makes Margot smile. ‘I could never.’ She hugged us one more time.

She saves me for last; the way I knew she would. ‘Take diligent care of Daddy and Kellie. You are in charge now.’ I do not want to let go; so, I hold on tighter; I am still waiting and hoping for some sign; some indication that she will miss us as much as we will miss her.

And then she laughs, and I release her.

‘Bye; Gogo;’ I say, wiping my eyes with a corner of my shirt.

We all watch as she pushes the luggage carrier over to the check-in counter.

I am crying hard, wiping my tears with the back of my arm. Daddy puts one arm around me and one around Kellie. 'We'll wait until she's in line for security;' he says.

When she has done checking in, she turns back and looks at us through the glass doors.

She lifts one hand and waves, and then she heads for the security line. We watched her go; thinking she might turn around one more time, but she did not. She already seems so far away from us. Straight-A Margot; ever capable. When it is my time to leave; I doubt I will be as strong as Margot. But honestly, who is?

I cried all the way home. Kellie tells me I am a bigger baby than she is, but then from the backseat; she grabs my hand and squeezes it, and I know she is sad too.

Even though Margot is not a loud person; it feels quite at home. Empty; somehow. What will it be like when I am gone in two years? What will Daddy and Kellie do then? I hate the thought of the two of them coming home to an empty ark house with no me and no Margot.

I will not go away far; I will even live at home; at least for the first semester. I think that would be the right thing to do.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON CHRIS calls and tells me to meet her at the mall; she wants my opinion on a leather jacket, and to get the full effect I must see it in person. I am proud she is asking for my sartorial advice, and it would be good to get out of the house and not be sad anymore, but I am nervous about driving to the mall alone. I (or anyone; really) would consider myself a skittish driver.

I asked her if she would just send me a picture instead, but Chris knows me too well. She says, 'Nuh-uh. You get your ass down here, Lara Jean. You will never get better at driving if you do not just suck it up and do it.'

So, that is what I am doing- I am driving Margot's car to the mall. I mean; I have my license and everything; I am just not noticeably confident. My dad has taken me for lessons numerous times; Margot too, and I am fine with them in the car, but I get nervous when I drive alone. It is the part of the changing lane that scares me. I do not like taking my eyes away from what is happening right in front of me; not for a second.

Also, I do not like going too fast.

But the worst thing is I tend to get lost. The only places I can get to with absolute certainty are school and the grocery store. I have never had to know how to get to the mall because Margot always drives us there. But now I must do better because I am responsible for driving Kellie around.

Though truthfully, Kellie is better with directions than I am; she knows how to get to a load of places. But I do not want to have to hear her tell me how to get somewhere. I want to feel like the big sister; I want her to relax in the passenger seat; safe in the knowledge that Lara Jean will get her where she needs to go; just like I did with Margot.

Sure; I could just use a GPS, but I would feel silly putting in directions to go to the mall when I have been there a million times. It should come to me intuitively; easy, where I do not even have to think about it. Instead, I worry about every turn; second-guess every highway sign; is it north or is it south; do I turn right here, or is it the next one? I have never had to pay attention to it.

But today; so far so good. I am listening to the radio; bopping along; even driving with just one hand on the wheel. I do this to feign confidence because the more I fake it; the more it is supposed to feel true.

Everything is going so well that I take the shortcut instead of the highway way. I cut through the side neighborhood, and even as I am doing it; I am wondering if this was such a great idea. After a couple of minutes, things were not looking so familiar, and I realized; I should have taken a left instead of a right. I push down the panic that is rising in my chest and I try to backtrack.

You can do it; you can do it.

There is a four-way stop sign. I do not see anyone; so, I zip ahead. I do not even see the car on my right; I feel it before I see it.

I scream my head off. I tasted copper in my mouth. Am I bleeding? Did I bite my tongue; off? I touched it and it is still there. My heart is racing; my whole body feels wet and clammy.

I try to take deep breaths, but I cannot seem to get air.

My legs shake as I get out of the car. The other guy is already out; inspecting his car with his arms crossed. He is old; older than my dad, and he has gray hair, and he is wearing shorts with red lobsters on them. His car is fine;

mine has a huge dent in the side. 'Didn't you see the stop sign?' He demands... 'Where you are texting on your phone?'

I shake my head; my throat is closing. I just do not want to cry. If I do not cry. He senses this. The irritated furrow of his brow is loosening. 'Well; my car looks fine;' he says reluctantly. 'Are you all, right?'

Part- 5

I nod again. 'I'm so sorry;' I say.

'Kids need to be more careful;' the man says as if I have not spoken.

The lump in my throat is getting bigger. 'I'm very; deeply sorry; sir.'

He makes a grunting sound. 'You should call someone to get you;' the man says.

'Do you want me to wait?'

'No; thank you.' What if he is a serial killer or a child molester? I do not want to be alone with a strange man. The man drives off.

As soon as he is gone, it occurs to me that I should have called the police while he was still here. Aren't you always supposed to call the police when you are in a car accident; no matter what? I am sure they told us that in driver's ed. So that is another mistake I made.

I sat down on the curb and stared at Margot's car. I have only had it for two hours and I have already wrecked it. I rest my head on my lap and sit in a tight bundle. My neck is starting to ache. This is when the tears start. My dad is not going to be happy.

Margot is not going to be happy. They will both agree that I have no business driving around town unsupervised, and they are right. Driving a car is a lot of responsibility. Maybe

I am not ready for it yet...

I will never be ready. Even when I am old, my sisters or my dad will have to drive me around because that is how useless I am.

I pull out my phone and call Josh. When he answers, I say, 'Josh; can you do me an f-f-favor?' and my voice comes out so wobbly I am embarrassed.

Which of course he hears because he's Josh. He comes to attention immediately and says, 'What's wrong?'

'I just got into a car accident. I do not even know where I am. Can you come to get me?'

Wobble - Wobble.

'Are you hurt?' He demands...

'No; I am fine. I am just- 'If I say another word; I will cry.'

'What street signs do you see? What stores?'

I crane my neck to look. 'Obsession;' I say. I looked for the closest mailbox.

'I'm at 9810 Obsession Road.'

'I am on my way. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you?'

'No; that's okay.' I hung up and started to cry.

I do not know how long I have been sitting there crying when another car rolls up in front of me. I look up, and it is Marcel Kavinsky's black Audi with tinted windows. One of them rolls down. 'Lara Jean? Are you okay?'

I nod my head yes and make a motion as if he should just go. He rolls the window back up, and he is going to drive off; but then he pulls over to the side and parks.

He climbs out and starts inspecting my car. 'You messed it up;' he says. 'Did you get the other guy's insurance info?'

'No; his car was fine.' Furtively, I wipe my cheeks with my arm. 'It was my fault.'

'Do you have Triple A?' I nod.

'So; you called them already?'

'No. But someone's coming.'

Marcel sits down next to me. 'How long have you been sitting here crying by yourself?'

I turn my head and wipe my face again. 'I'm not crying.'

Marcel Kavinsky and I used to be friends; back before he was Kavinsky when he was Marcel K. There was a whole gang of us in middle school. The boys were Marcel Kavinsky and John Ambrose McClaren and Trevor Pike. The girls were Genevieve and me and Allie Feldman who lived down the block and sometimes Chris. Growing up.

Genevieve lived two streets away from me. It is funny how much childhood is about proximity. Like whom your best friend is directly correlated to how close your houses are, whom you sit next to in music is all about how close your names are to the alphabet. Such a game of chance.

In eighth grade- Genevieve moved to a different neighborhood, and we stayed friends a little while longer. She had come back to the neighborhood to hang out, but something was different. By high school- Genevieve had eclipsed us. She was still friends with the boys, but the girls' crew was over. Allie and I stayed friends until she moved last year, but there was always something just a little bit humiliating about it like we were two leftover heels of bread and together we made a dry sandwich.

We are not friends anymore. Me and Genevieve or me and Marcel. Therefore, it is so weird to be sitting next to him on somebody's curb as no time has passed.

His phone buzzed and he took it out of his pocket. 'I've got to go.'

I sniffle. 'Where are you headed?'

'To Gen's.'

'You'd better get going then;' I say. 'Genevieve will be mad if you're late.'

Marcel makes a piffle sound, but he sure does get up fast. I wonder what it is like to have that much power over a boy. I do not think I would want it; it is a lot of responsibility to hold a person's heart in your hands. He is getting into his car when, as an afterthought, he turns around and asks; 'Want me to call Triple-A for you?'

'No; that's okay;' I say. 'Thanks for stopping; though. That was nice of you.'

Marcel grins. I remember that about Marcel- how much he likes positive reinforcement.

‘Do you feel better now?’

I nod. I do.

‘Good,’ he says.

He has the look of a Handsome Boy from a different time. He could be a dashing World War I soldier; handsome enough for a girl to wait years for him to come back from the war; so handsome she could wait forever. He could be wearing a red letterman’s jacket; driving around in a Corvette with the top down; one arm on the steering wheel; on his way to pick up his girl for the sock hop. Marcel’s wholesome good looks feel more like yesterday than today. There is just something about him that girls like.

He was my first kiss. It is so strange to think of it now. It feels like forever ago, but it was just four years.

Josh shows up around a minute later as I am texting Chris that I am not going to make it to the mall. I stand up. ‘It took you long enough!’

‘You told me in 9810. This is 8901!’

Confidently I say, ‘No; I said 8901.’

‘No; you said 9810. And why weren’t you answering your phone?’ Josh gets out of his car, and when he sees the side of my car, his jaw drops.

‘Holy crap... Did you call Triple A yet?’

‘No... can you?’

Josh does, and then we sit in his car in the air-conditioning while we wait. I almost get into the backseat when I remember. Margot is not here anymore. I have ridden in his car so many times, and I do not think I have ever once sat up front in the passenger seat.

‘Um - you know Margot’s going to kill you; right?’

I whip my head around so fast my hair slaps me in the face. ‘Margot’s not going to find out; so, don’t you say a word!’

‘When would I even talk to her? We have broken up; remember?’

I frown at him....

'I hate when people do that- when you ask them to keep something a secret and instead of saying yes or no; they say, 'Whom would I tell?'

'I did not say, 'Whom would I tell?'

'Just say yes or no and mean it. Do not make it conditional.'

'I won't tell Margot anything;' he says. 'It will just be between you and me. I promise... all right?'

'All right;' I say. And then it gets quiet with neither of us saying anything; there is just the sound of cool air coming out of the A/C vents.

My stomach feels queasy thinking about how I am going to tell my dad.

I should break the news to him with tears in my eyes; so, he feels sorry for me. Or I could say something like; I have good news and unwelcome news. The good news is I am fine; not a scratch on me. The unwelcome news is the car is wrecked. 'wrecked' is not the right word.

I am mulling over the right word choice in my head when Josh says, 'So just because; Margot and I broke up; you're not going to talk to me anymore either?' Josh sounds jokingly bitter or bitterly joking if there is such a combination.

I looked over at him in surprise. 'Do not be dumb. Of course, I am still going to talk to you.'

'Just not in public.' This is the role I play with him. The part about the annoying little sister. As if I am the same as Kellie. As if we are not only a year apart. Josh does not crack a smile; he just looks glum; so, I bump my forehead against his. 'That was a joke; dummy!'

'Did she tell you she was going to do it? I mean; was it always her plan?'

When I hesitate; he says, 'Come on. I know she tells you everything.'

'Not really. Not this time anyway. Honestly, Josh. I did not know a thing about it. Promise.' I cross my heart.

Josh absorbs this. Chewing on his bottom lip he says, 'She will change her mind. That is possible; right?'

I do not know if it is more heartless for me to say yes or no because he will be hurt either way. Because while I am 99.9 percent sure that she will get

back together with him; there is that tiny chance she will not, and I do not want to get his hopes up. So-o I do not say anything.

He swallows; his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. 'No; you are right.

When Margot makes up her mind; she does not go back on it.'

Please, please; please; do not cry.

I rest my head on his shoulder and say, 'You never know; Joshy.'

Josh stares straight ahead. A squirrel is darting up the big oak tree in the yard. Up and down and back up again. We both watch. 'What time does she land?'

'Not for hours...'

'Is - is she coming home for Thanksgiving?'

'No. They do not get off for Thanksgiving. It is Scotland; Josh. They do not celebrate American holidays; hello!' I am teasing again, but my heart's not in it.

'That's right;' he says.

I say, 'She'll be home for Christmas; though;' and we both sigh.

'Can I still spend time together with you guys?' Josh asks me.

'Me and Kellie?'

'Your dad; too.'

'We're not going anywhere;' I assure him.

Josh looks relieved. 'Good. I would hate to lose you; too.'

As soon as he says it, my heart pauses, and I forget to breathe, and just for that one second, I am dizzy. And then, just as quickly as it came; the feeling; the strange flutter in my chest; is gone, and the tow truck arrives.

When we pull into my driveway; he says, 'Do you want me to be there when you tell your dad?'

I brighten up and then I remember how Margot said I am in charge now. I am sure taking responsibility for one's mistakes is part of being in charge.

DADDY ISN'T SO MAD After all. I go through my whole good news-bad news story, and he just sighs and says, 'As long as you're all right.'

The car needs a special part that must be flown in from Indiana or Idaho; I cannot remember which. In the meantime, I will have to share the car with Daddy and take the bus to school or ask Josh for rides, which was already my plan.

Margot calls later that night. Kellie and I are watching TV and I screamed for Daddy to come quick. We sit on the couch and pass the phone around and take turns talking to her.

'Margot; guess what happened today!' Kellie shouts.

Frantically, I shake my head at her. Do not tell her about the car; I mouth. I give her warning eyes.

'Lara Jean got into -' Kellie pauses tantalizingly. 'A fight with Daddy.

Yes, she was mean to me, and Daddy told her to be nice; so, they fought.'

I grabbed the phone out of her hand. 'We did not fight; Go-go. Kellie's just being annoying.'

'What did you guys have for dinner? Did you cook the chicken I defrosted last night?'

Margot asks. Her voice sounds so far away.

I push the volume up on the phone. 'Yes; but never mind about that. Are you settled in your room? Is it big? What is your roommate like?'

'She is nice. She is from London, and she has a fancy accent. Her name is Penelope St. George-Dixon.'

'Gosh; even her name sounds fancy;' I say. 'What about your room?'

'The room is about the same as that dorm we saw at UVA; it's just older.'

'What time is it over there?'

'It is midnight. We are five hours ahead; remember?'

We are five hours ahead like she is already considering Scotland her home, and she has only been gone a day; not even! ‘We miss you already,’ I tell her.

‘Miss; you too.’

After dinner, I texted Chris to see if she wants to come over, but she does not text back.

She is out with one of the guys she hooks up with. Which is fine. I should catch up on my scrapbooking.

I was hoping to be done with Margot’s scrapbook before she left for college, but as anyone who is ever scrapbooked knows; Rome was not built in a day. You could spend a year or more working on one scrapbook.

I have Motown girl group music playing, and my supplies are laid out all around me in a semicircle. My heart hole punch; pages, and pages of scrapbook paper; pictures I have cut out of magazines; glue gun; my tape dispenser with all my different colored washi tapes.

Souvenirs like the playbill from when we saw Wicked in New York; receipts; pictures.

Ribbon; buttons; stickers; charms. A good scrapbook has texture. It is thick and chunky and does not close all the way.

I am working on a Josh-and-Margot page. I do not care what Margot says.

They are getting back together; I know it. And even if they are not right away; it is not like Margot can just erase him from her history. He was such a big part of her senior year.

And like, her life. The only compromise I am willing to make is I was saving my heart washi tape for this page, but I can just do a regular plaid tape instead. But then I put the plaid tape up against the pictures and the colors did not look as good.

So, I go ahead and use the heat tape. And then, swaying to the music; I use my heart template to cut out a picture of the two of them at prom. Margot’s going to love this.

I am carefully gluing a dried rose petal from Margot’s corsage when my dad raps on the door. ‘What are you up to tonight?’ he asks me.

‘This;’ I say, gluing another petal. ‘If I keep at it; it’ll probably be done by Christmas.’

‘Ah.’ My dad does not move. He just hovers there in the doorway; watching me work.

‘Well; I’m going to watch that new Ken Burns documentary in a bit; if you want to join me.’

‘Maybe;’ I say, just to be nice. It will be too much of a pain to bring all my supplies downstairs and get set up again. I am in a good mood right now. ‘Why don’t you get it started without me?’

‘All right. I will leave you to it; then.’ Daddy shuffles down the stairs.

It takes me most of the night, but I finish the Josh-and-Margot page, and it comes out nice. Next is a sister page. For this one, I use flowered paper for the background, and I glue in a picture of the three of us from a long time ago. Mommy took it. We are standing in front of the oak tree in front of our house in our church clothes.

We are all wearing white dresses, and we have matching pink ribbons on our hair. The best thing about the picture is Margot and I are smiling sweetly, and Kellie is picking her nose.

I smile to myself. Kellie’s going to pitch a fit when she sees this page. I cannot wait.

MARGOT SAYS THAT JUNIOR Years are the most important year; the busiest year; a year so crucial that everything else in life hinges upon it. So, I figure I should get in all the pleasure reading I can before school starts next week and junior year officially begins. I am sitting on my front steps; reading a 1980’s romantic British spy novel I got for seventy-five cents at the Friends of the Library sale.

I am just getting to the good stuff (Cressida must seduce Nigel to gain access to the spy codes!) when Josh walks out of his house to get the mail. He sees me too; he lifts his hand like he is just going to wave and not come over; but then he does.

‘Hey; nice onesie;’ he says as he makes his way across the driveway.

It is faded light blue with sunflowers, and it ties around the neck. I got it from the vintage store; 75 percent off. And it is not a onesie. ‘This is a sunsuit;’ I

tell- him; going back to my book. I try to subtly hide the cover with my hand. The last thing I need is Josh giving me a challenging time for reading a trashy book when I am just trying to enjoy a relaxing afternoon.

I can feel him looking at me; his arms crossed; waiting. I look up.
'What?'

'Want to see a movie tonight at the Bess? There is a Pixar movie playing. We can take Kellie.'

'Sure; text me when you want to head over;' I say, turning the page of my book. Nigel is unbuttoning Cressida's blouse and she is wondering when the sleeping pill she slipped in his Merlot will kick in; while simultaneously hoping it will not kick in too soon because Nigel is quite a good kisser.

Josh reaches down and tries to get a closer look at my book. I slap his hand away, but not before he reads aloud; 'Cressida's heart raced as Nigel moved his hand along her stockinginged thigh.' Josh cracks up. 'What the heck are you reading?'

My cheeks are burning. 'Oh; be quiet.'

Chuckling; Josh backs away. 'I'll leave you to Cressida and Noel then.'

To his back, I call out; 'For your information; it's Nigel!'

Kellie's over the moon about hanging out with Josh. When Josh asks the girl at the concession stand to layer the butter on the popcorn (bottom; middle; top); we both give an approving nod. Kellie sits in the middle of us, and at the funny parts; she laughs so hard she kicks her legs up in the air. She weighs so little that the seat keeps tipping up. Josh and I share smiles over her head.

Whenever Josh, Margot, and I went to the movies, Margot always sat in the middle too. It was so she could whisper to both of us. She never wanted me to feel left out because she had a boyfriend, and I did not. She was so careful about this that it made me worry at first; that she sensed something from before. But she is not someone to hold back or up the truth. She is just a good big sister.

The best...

There were times that I felt left out anyway. Not in a romantic way; but in a friendly way. Josh and I had always been friends. But those times when he had put his arm around Margot when we were in line for popcorn; or in the car

when they would talk softly to each other, and I felt like the kid in the backseat who cannot hear what the adults are talking about; it made me feel a little bit invisible. They made me wish I had someone to whisper to in the backseat.

It is strange to be the one in the front seat now. The view is not so different from the backseat. Everything feels good and normal and the same, which is comfortable.

Chris calls me later that night while I am painting my toenails in different colored pinks. It is so loud in the background she must yell. 'Guess what!'

'What? I can barely hear you!' I am doing my pinky toe a fruit-punch color called Hit Me with Your Best Shot.

'Hold up.' I can hear Chris moving rooms because it gets quieter. 'Can you hear me now?'

'Yes; much better.'

'Guess who broke up.'

I have moved on to a mod pink color that looks like White-Out with a drop of red in it.

'Who?'

'Gen and Kavinsky! She dumped his ass.'

My eyes got huge. 'Whoa! Why?'

'Apparently; she met some UVA guy at that hostessing job she had. I guarantee you.

'she was cheating on Kavinsky the whole summer.' A guy calls Chris's name, and Chris says; 'I got to go. It is my turn at bocce.' Chris hangs up without saying goodbye, which is her way.

I met Chris through Genevieve. They are cousins- their moms are sisters. Chris used to come over sometimes when we were little, but she and Gen did not get along even back then. They would argue over whose Barbie had dibs on Ken because there was only one Ken. I did not even try to fight for Ken; even though he was technically mine.

Well, Margot's. At school, some people do not even know Gen and Chris are cousins. They do not look alike; like at all Gen is petite with fit arms and

sunny blond hair the color of margarine. Chris is blond too, but a peroxide blond-haired person and she is taller and has broad swimmer's shoulders. Still, there is a sameness to them. Chris was wild in our Shaddyman year. She went to every party; got drunk; hooked up with older boys. That year a junior guy from the lacrosse team told everyone that Chris had sex with him in the boys' locker room, and it was not even true.

Genevieve made Marcel threaten to kick his ass if he did not tell everybody the truth. I thought it was a cordial thing Genevieve did for Chris, but Chris insisted that Gen had only done it; so, people would not think she was related to a slut. After that Chris stopped hanging out and did her own thing, with people from another school. She still has that freshman-year reputation though. She acts like she does not care; but I know she does; at least a little.

ON SUNDAY, DADDY MAKES- lasagna. And he does- that thing where he puts black-bean salsa in it to jazz it up, and it sounds gross, but it is good, and you do not notice the beans. Josh comes over too, and he has three helpings, which Daddy loves. When Margot's name comes up over dinner, I look over at Josh and see how stiff he gets, and I feel sorry for him. Kellie must notice too because she changes the subject over to dessert, which is a batch of peanut-butter brownies I baked earlier in the afternoon. Since Daddy cooked; our kids have kitchen duty. He uses every pot in the kitchen when he makes lasagna; so, it is the worst cleanup; but worth it.

After the three of us relax in the TV room. It is Sunday night, but there is not that Sunday night feeling in the air because tomorrow is Labor Day, and we have one last day before school starts. Kellie's working on her dog collage; Quelle's surprise.

'What kind do you want most of all?' Josh asks her.

Kellie answers back lightning fast. 'An Akita.'

'Child?'

Again, her answer is prompt. 'Boy.'

'What'll you name him?'

Kellie hesitates, and I know why. I roll over and tickle Kellie's barefoot. 'I know what you'll name him;' I say in a singsong voice.

'Be quiet; Lara Jean!' she screeches.

I have Josh's full attention now. 'Come on; tell us;' Josh begs.

I look at Kellie and she is giving me evil glowing red eyes. 'Never mind;' I say, feeling nervous suddenly. Kellie might be the baby of the family, but she is not someone to trifle with.

Then Josh tugs on my ponytail and says, 'Aw; come on; Lara Jean! Do not leave us in suspense.'

I prop myself up on my elbows, and Kellie tries to put her hand over my mouth.

Giggling: I say, 'It's after a boy she likes.'

'Shut up; Lara Jean; shut up!'

Kellie kicks me, and in doing so she accidentally rips one of her dog pictures.

She lets out a cry and drops to her knees and examines it. Her face is red with the effort of not crying. I feel like such a jerk. I sit up and try to give her and I am a sorry hug, but she twists away from me and kicks at my legs; so hard I yelp. I pick the picture up and try to tape it back, but before I can, Kellie snatches it out of my hands and gives it to Josh. 'Josh; fix it;' she says. 'Lara Jean ruined it.' 'Kellie; I was only teasing,' I say lamely. I was not going to say the name of the boy. I would never have said it.

She ignores me, and Josh smooths the paperback out with a coaster, and with the concentration of a surgeon; he tapes the two pieces together. He wipes his brow. 'Phew. I think this one will make it.'

I clap, and I try to catch Kellie's eye, but she will not look at me. I know I deserve it. The boy Kellie has a crush on- is Josh.

Kellie whisks her college away from Josh. Stiffly she says, 'I am going upstairs to work on this. Good night, Josh.'

'Night; Kellie;' Josh says.

Meekly, I say, 'Good night; Kellie;' but she is already running up the stairs, and she does not reply.

When we hear her bedroom door closing; Josh turns to me and says, 'You're in so much trouble.'

'I know,' I say. I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why did I do that?

Even as I was doing it; I knew it was wrong. Margot would never have done that to me.

That is not how big sisters are supposed to treat their little sisters; especially not when I am so much older than Kellie.

'Who's this kid she likes?'

'Just a boy from school.'

Josh sighs. 'Is she old enough to have crushes on boys? I feel like she is too young for all that.'

'I had crushes on boys when I was nine,' I tell him. I am still thinking about Kellie. I wonder how I can make it; so, she is not mad at me anymore. Somehow, I do not think snickerdoodles will cut it this time.

'Who?' Josh asks me.

'Who what?' I can somehow convince Daddy to buy her a puppy.

'Who was your first crush?'

'Hmm. My first real crush?' I had kindergarten and first- and second-grade crushes aplenty, but they do not count. 'Like the first one that mattered?'

'Sure.'

'Well - I guess Marcel Kavinsky.'

Josh practically gags. 'Kavinsky? Are you kidding me? He is so obvious. I thought you would be into someone more - I do not know; subtle. Marcel Kavinsky's such a cliché. He is like a cardboard cutout of a 'cool guy,' in a movie about high school.'

I shrug. 'You asked.'

'Wow,' he says, shaking his head. 'Just - wow.'

'He used to be different. I mean; he was still very Marcel; but less so.'

When Josh looks unconvinced; I say, 'You're a boy; so, you can't understand what I'm talking about.'

'You are right. I do not understand!'

'Hey; you're the one who had a crush on Ms. Rossinchild!'

Josh turns red. 'She was pretty back then!'

'Uh-huh.' I give him a knowing look. 'She was really 'pretty.' 'Our across-the-street neighbor Ms. Rossinchild used to mow her lawn in terry-cloth short shorts and a string bikini top. The neighborhood boys would conveniently play in Josh's yard on those days.

'Anyway; Ms. Rossinchild wasn't my first crush.'

'She wasn't?'

'No... you were.'

It takes me a few seconds to process this. Even then, all I can manage is 'Huh?'

'When I first moved here; before I knew your true personality.' I kick him in the shin for that, and he yelps. 'I was twelve and you were eleven. I let you ride my scooter; remember? That scooter was my pride and joy. I saved up for it for two birthdays. And I let you take it for a ride.'

'I thought you were just being generous.'

'You crashed it, and you got a big scratch on the side;' he continues.

Continued- 1

'Remember that?'

'Yeah; I remember you cried.'

'I did not cry. I was justifiably upset. And that was the end of my little crush.' Josh gets up to go and we walk to the foyer.

Before he opens the front door, Josh turns around and says to me; 'I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been around after - Margot dumped me.' A blush blooms pink across his face; underneath each sweetly freckled cheek. 'You're keeping me going; Lara Jean.' Josh looks at me and I feel it all; every memory; every moment we have ever shared. Then he gives me a quick; fierce hug and disappears into the night.

I am standing there in the open door and the thought flies in my head; so quick; so unexpected; I cannot stop myself from thinking it- If you were mine; I would never have broken up with you; not in a million years.

THIS IS HOW WE MET josh. We were having a teddy-bear; a tea-party picnic on the back lawn with real tea and muffins. It had to be in the backyard; so, no one would see. I was eleven; way too old for it, and Margot was thirteen; way; way too old. I got the idea in my head because- I read about it in a book. Because of Kellie, I could pretend it was for her and persuade Margot into playing with us. Mommy had died the year before and ever since Margot rarely said no to anything if it was for Kellie.

We had everything spread out on Margot's old baby blanket, which was blue and nubby with a squirrel print. I laid out a chipped tea set of Margot's; mini muffins studded with blueberries and granules of sugar that I made Daddy buy at the grocery store and a teddy bear for each of us. We were all wearing hats because I insisted.

'You have to wear a hat to a tea party;' I kept saying until Margot finally put hers on just so; I would stop. She had on Mommy's straw gardening hat, Kellie was wearing a tennis visor, and I had fancied up an old Grandma's fur hat by pinning a few plastic flowers on top. I was pouring lukewarm tea out of the thermos and into cups when Josh climbed up on the fence and watched us. The month before, from the upstairs playroom, we had watched Josh's family move in. We had hoped for girls, but then we saw the movers unload a boy's bike and we went back to playing.

Josh sat up on the fence; not saying anything, and Margot was stiff and embarrassed; her cheeks were red, but she kept her hat on. Kellie was the one to call out to him. 'Hello; boy;' she said.

'Hi;' he said. His hair was shaggy, and he kept shaking it out of his eyes. He was wearing a red T-shirt with a hole in the shoulder.

Kellie asked him; 'What's your name?'

'Josh.'

'You should play with us; Josh;' Kellie commanded.

So- he did.

I did not know then how important this boy would become to me and the people I loved the most. But even if I had known; what could I have done differently?

It was never going to be me and him. Even though.

I THOUGHT I WAS OVER him.

When I wrote my letter; when I said my goodbyes; I meant it; I swear I did.

It was not even that hard; not really. Not when I thought about how much Margot liked him; how much she cared. How could I begrudge Margot a first love? Margot: who had sacrificed so much for all of us. She always, always put Kellie and me before herself.

Letting go of Josh was my way of putting Margot first.

But now, sitting here alone in my living room, with my sister four thousand miles away and Josh next door, all I can think of is Josh Sanderson; I liked you first. By all rights, you were mine. And if it had been me, I would have packed you in my suitcase and taken you with me, or you know what, I would have stayed. I would have never left you.

Not in a million years; not for anything.

Thinking these kinds of thoughts; feeling these kinds of feelings; is more than disloyal. I know that. It is downright traitorous. It makes my soul feel dirty.

Margot's been gone less than a week and looks at me; how fast I cave. How fast I covet. I am a betrayer of the worst kind; because I am betraying my sister, and there is no greater betrayal than that. But what now? What am I supposed to do with all these feelings?

I suppose there is only one thing I can do. I will write him another letter. A postscript with as many pages as it takes X away whatever feelings I have left for him.

I will put this whole thing to rest, for the last time.

I go to my room, and I find my special writing pen; the one with smooth inky black ink. I take out my heavy writing paper, and I begin to write. PS I still love you.

I still love you and that is a huge problem for me, and it is also a huge surprise. I swear I did not know. All this time, I thought I was over it. How could I not be when it is Margot you love? It has always been Margot- - when I am done; I placed the message in my diary alternatively of in my hatbox. I have a feeling I am not done-done yet; that there is still further I need to tell; I just have not thought of it, nevertheless.

KELLIE'S STILL MAD AT ME- In the wake of the Josh revelation; I had forgotten all about Kellie. She neglects me all daybreak, and when I ask if she wants me to take her to the store for class accumulations; she locks; 'With what car? You destroyed Margot's.'

Oops! 'I was going to take Daddy's when he comes back from Home Depot.' I back away from her; far enough away that she cannot lash out at me with a kick or a hit.

'There's no need to be sarcastic; Katherine.'

Kellie practically growls, which is exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I hate it when Kellie goes mad and silent. But then she flounces away, and with her back to me; she says; 'I am not conversing with you.'

You know what you did; consequently, do not bother attempting to get back on my good side.'

I follow her around; trying to provoke her into talking to me, but there is no use. I have stayed clear.

So, I give up and go back to my room and put on the Mermaids soundtrack. I am planning my first week back-to-school outlay on my bed when I get a text from Josh. A little excitement runs up my spine to see his name on my phone, but I sternly remind myself of my pledge. He is still Margot's; not yours. It prepares things that are broken up. He was hers first, which means he is hers always. Want to go for a bike ride on that trail by the park?

Biking is a Margot-type activity. She loves going on trails, hikes, and bikes. Negative with me.

Josh knows it too. I do not even own my bike anymore, and Margot's is too big for me.

Kellie's is more my size.

I wrote back that I cannot; I must help my dad around the house. It is not a total lie.

My dad did ask me to help him report some of his plants. And I said only if he was making me and if I had no say in the matter; then sure.

What does he need help with?

What to say? I must be careful about my excuses; Josh can easily look out the window and see if I am home or not. I text back a vague Just some random chores.

Knowing Josh; he would show up with a shovel or a rake or whatever tool the chore entailed. And then he would stay for dinner because he always stays for dinner.

He said I was keeping him going. Me; Lara Jean. I want to be that person for him; I want to be the one who keeps him going during this challenging time. I want to be his lighthouse keeper while we wait for Margot's return. But it is hard. It was harder than I thought.

I WAKE UP HAPPY BECAUSE it is the first day of school. I have always loved the first day of school more than the last day of school. Firsts are best because they are beginnings.

While Daddy and Kellie are upstairs washing up, I make whole-wheat pancakes with sliced bananas; Kellie's favorite. First-day-of-school breakfast was always an important thing with my mom, and then Margot took over, and now I guess- it is my turn. The pancakes are a little dense, not as light, and fluffy as Margot's. And the coffee - well; is coffee supposed to be light brown like cocoa? When Daddy comes down, he says in a merry voice; 'I smell coffee!' And then he drinks it and gives me a thumbs-up, but I notice he only has one sip. I am a better baker than I am a cook.

'You look like a farm girl,' Kellie says with a touch of meanness, and I know she is still at least a little bit mad at me. 'Thank you,' I say. I am wearing faded short-tails and a scoop-neck floral shirt. It does look farm-girlish, but I think pleasantly. Margot left her brown lace-up combat boots, and they are only half the size too big. With thick socks, they are a perfect fit. 'Will you braid my hair to the side?' I asked her. 'You don't deserve a braid from me,' Kellie says, licking her fork. 'Besides; a braid would take it too far.'

Kellie is only nine, but she has a good fashion sense.

'Agreed;' my dad says, not looking up from his paper.

I put my plate in the sink and then put Kellie's lunch bag down next to her plate. It has all her favorite things- a Brie sandwich; barbecue chips; rainbow cookies; a good kind of apple juice.

'Have a great first day;' my dad chirps. He pops out his cheek for a kiss, and I bend down and give him one. I try to give Kellie one too, but she turns her cheek.

'I got your favorite kind of apple juice and your favorite kind of Brie;' I tell her pleadingly. I do not want us to start the school year off on a bad note.

'Thank you;' she sniffles with a tissue.

Before she can stop me, I throw my arms around her and squeeze her so tight she yelps. Then I get my new floral back-to-school book bag and head out the front door. It is a new day, a new year. I have a feeling it is going to be a good one.

Josh is already in the car, and I run over and open the door and slide inside with him.

'You're on time;' Josh says. He lifts his hand for a hand bump, and when I slap his knuckles; our hands make a soft smack. 'That was a good one;' he says.

'An eight at least;' I agree. We zipped past the pool; the sign for our neighborhood; then past Wendy's.

'Do you think, Kellie, forgive you yet for the other night?'

'Not quite; but hopefully soon.'

'Nobody can hold a grudge like Kellie;' Josh says, and I nod wholeheartedly. I can never stay mad for long, but Kellie will nurse a hatred as if her life depended on this. 'I made her a good first-day-of-school lunch; so, that'll help;' I say. 'You're a good elder sibling.'

I pipe up with 'As good as Margot?' Furthermore, collectively we chorus; 'Nobody's as immeasurable as Margot.'

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 25

Dollie

XXXO

SCHOOL HAS OFFICIALLY BEGUN AN found its rhythm. The first couple of days of school are always throwaway days of handing out books and syllabuses and figuring out where you are sitting and who you are sitting with. Now is when school begins.

For the gym, Coach White set us loose outside to enjoy the warm sun while we still have it. Chris and I are walking the track field. Chris is telling me about a party she went to over Labor Day weekend. 'I almost got into a fight with this girl who kept saying I was wearing extensions.

'It is not my fault my hair is fabulous.' As we were around the corner for our third lap, I caught Marcel Kavinsky looking at me. I thought I was imagining it at first; him staring in my direction, but this is the third time.

He is playing ultimate Frisbee with some of the guys. When we pass them, Marcel jogs over to us and says, 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

Chris and I look at each other. 'Her or me?' she asks.

'Lara Jean.'

Chris puts her arm around my shoulder protectively. 'Go ahead. We are listening.'

Marcel rolls his eyes. 'I want to talk to her in private.'

'Fine;' she snaps, and she flounces away. Over her shoulder, she looks back at me with wide eyes; like What? I shrug back like I have no idea!

In a low; quiet voice, Marcel says, 'Just so you know; I don't have any STDs.'

What? I stared at him; my mouth open. 'I never said you had an STD!'

His voice is still low but furious. 'I also don't always take the last piece of pizza.'

'What are you talking about?'

‘That is what you said. In your letter. How I am an egotistical guy who goes around giving girls STDs. Remember?’

‘What letter? I never wrote you any letter!’

Wait- Yes; I did. I did write him a letter; about a million years ago. But that is not the letter he is talking about. It could not be.

‘Yes. You. Did. It was addressed to me; from you.’

Oh; God. No. No. This is not happening. This is not reality. I am dreaming. I am in my room, and I am dreaming, and Marcel Kavinsky is in my dream, glaring at me. I close my eyes. Am I dreaming? Is this real?

‘Lara Jean?’

I open my eyes. I am not dreaming, and this is real. This is a nightmare.

Marcel Kavinsky is holding my letter in his hand. It is my handwriting; my envelope; my everything. ‘How- how did you get that?’

‘It came in the mail yesterday.’ Marcel sighs. Gruffly he says, ‘Listen; it’s no big deal; I just hope you’re not going around telling people...’

‘It came in the mail. To your house?’

‘Yeah.’

I feel faint. I feel faint. Please let me faint right now; because if I faint, I will no longer be here; at this moment. It will be like in movies when a girl passes out from the horror of it all and the fighting happens while she is asleep, and she wakes up in a hospital bed with a bruise or two, but she is missing all the serious stuff.

I wish that were my life instead of this. I can feel myself start to sweat. Rapidly I say, ‘You should know that I wrote that letter a really long time ago.’

‘Okay.’

‘Like; years ago, years and years ago... I do not even remember what I said.’

Up close; your face was not so much handsome as beautiful. ‘Seriously; that letters from middle school. I do not even know who would have sent it. Can I see it?’ I reach for the letter; trying to stay calm and not sound desperate. Just casual cool.

He hesitates and then grins his perfect Marcel grin. 'Nah; I want to keep it. I never got a letter like this before.' I leap forward, and quick like a cat I snatch it out of his hand. Marcel laughs and throws up his hands in surrender. 'All right; fine; have it. Geez.'

'Thanks.' I started to back away from him. The paper is shaking my hand.

'Wait.' He hesitates. 'Listen; I did not mean to steal your first kiss or whatever. I mean; that was not my intention...'

I laugh a forced and fake laugh that sounds crazy even to my ears.

People turn around and look at us. 'Apology accepted! Ancient history!' And then I bolted. I run faster than I have ever run. To the girls' locker room.

How did this even happen?

I sink to the floor. I have had the going-to-school-naked dream before. I have had the going-to-school-naked-forgot-to-study-for-an-exam-in-a-class-I-never-signed-up-for combo; the naked-exam-somebody-trying-to-kill-me combo. This is all that times infinity.

And then, because there was nothing left for me to do, I took the letter out of the envelope, and I read it.

Dear Marcel.

First, I refuse to call you Kavinsky. You think you are so cool, going by your last name suddenly. Just so you know; Kavinsky sounds like the name of an old man with a long white beard.

Did you know that when you kissed me, I would come to love you? Sometimes I think yes.

Yes. You know why? Because you think EVERYONE loves you, Marcel. That is what I hate about you. Because everyone does love you. Including me. I did. Not anymore.

Here are all your worst qualities- You burp, and you do not say excuse me. You just assume everyone else will find it charming. And if they don't, who cares; right? Wrong! You do care. You care a lot about what people think of you. You always take the last piece of pizza. You never ask if anyone else wants it. That is rude. You are so good at everything.

Too good. You could have given other guys a chance to be good, but you never did. You kissed me for no reason. Even though I knew you liked Gen, and you knew you liked Gen, and Gen knew you liked Gen. But you still did it. Just because you could.

I want to know- Why would you do that to me? My first kiss was supposed to be something special. I have read about it; what it is supposed to feel like- fireworks and lightning bolts and the sound of waves crashing in your ears. I did not have any of that. Thanks to you it was as un-special as a kiss could be.

The worst part of it is that stupid nothing kiss is what made me start liking you. I never did it before. I never even thought about you before. Gen has always said that you are the best-looking boy in our grade, and I agreed; because sure, you are. But I still did not see the allure of you.

Plenty of people are good-looking. That does not make them interesting, intriguing, or cool.

That is why you kissed me. To do mind control on me; to make me see you that way. It worked. Your little trick worked. From then on, I saw you. Up close; your face was not so much handsome as beautiful. How many beautiful boys have you ever seen? For me, it was just one.

You. It is a lot to do with your lashes. You have long lashes. Unfairly long.

Even though you do not deserve it; fine; I will go into all the things I liked about you- One time in science; nobody wanted to be partners with Jeffrey Suttleman because he has BO, and you volunteered like it was no big deal. Suddenly everybody thought Jeffrey was not so bad.

You are still in the chorus; even though all the other boys take band and orchestra now. You even sing solos. And you dance, and you are not embarrassed.

You were the last boy to get tall. And now you are the tallest, but it is like you earned it. Also, when you were short; no one even cared that you were short- the girls still liked you and the boys still picked you first for basketball in the gym.

After you kissed me; I liked you for the rest of seventh grade and most of eighth. It has not been easy; watching you with Gen; holding hands and making out at the bus loop.

You make her feel incredibly special. Because that is your talent; right? You are good at making people feel special.

Do you know what it is like to like someone so much you cannot stand it and know that they will never feel the same way? Not. People like you do not have to suffer through those. It was easier after Gen moved and we stopped being friends. At least then I did not have to hear about it. And now that the year is over, I know for sure that I am also over you.

I am immune to you now, Marcel. I am proud to say that I am the only girl in this school who has been immunized with the charms of Marcel Kavinsky. All because I had a bad dose of yours in seventh grade and most of eighth. Now I never have to worry about catching you again.

What a relief! I bet if I did ever kiss you again; I would catch something, and it would not be love. It would be an STD!

Lara Jean Song: IF I COULD CRAWL INTO a hole and burrow in it comfortably and live out the rest of my days in it; well; then that is what I would do.

Why did I have to bring up that kiss? Why?

I still remember everything about that day at John Ambrose McLaren's house. We were in the basement, and it smelled like mildew and laundry detergent. I was wearing white shorts and an embroidered blue-and-white halter top I stole out of Margot's closet.

I had a strapless bra for the first time. It was one of Chris's, and I kept adjusting it because it felt unnatural.

It was one of our first boy-girl hangouts on a weekend and at night. That was a weird thing too because it felt purposeful. Different from going over to Allie's house after school and neighborhood boys are there hanging out with her twin brother.

Also- different from going to the arcade at the mall knowing we would run into boys. This was deciding; getting dropped off; wearing a special bra; all on a Saturday night.

No parents around; just us in John's ultra-private basement. John's older brother was supposed to be watching us, but John paid him ten dollars to stay in his room. Not that anything exciting happened; for instance; an impromptu game of spin the bottle or seven minutes in heaven- two possibilities for which we girls had prepared for with gum and lip gloss. All that happened was the boys played video games and we girls watched and played on our phones and whispered to each other.

And then people's moms and dads were picking them up, and it was so anticlimactic after all that planning and anticipation. It was disappointing for me; not because I liked anyone; but because I liked romance and drama, and I was hoping something exciting would happen to someone. Something did.

To me!

Marcel and I were downstairs alone; the last two people to be picked up. We were sitting on the couch. I kept texting my dad, "Where are you? Marcel was playing a game on his phone. And then; out of nowhere; he said, 'Your hair smells like coconuts.'

We were not even sitting that close. I said, 'Really? You can smell it from there?'

He scooted closer and took a sniff, nodding. 'Yeah; it reminds me of Hawaii or something.'

'Thanks!' I spoke. I was not positive it was a compliment, but it seemed like enough of one to say thanks. 'I've been switching between this coconut one and my sister's baby shampoo; to do an experiment on which makes my hair softer.'

Then Marcel Kavinsky leaned right in and kissed me, and I was stunned.

I had never thought of him any kind of way before that kiss. He was too pretty; too smooth. Not my type of boy at all. But after he kissed me; he was all I could think about for months after. What if Marcel is just the beginning? What if - what if my other letters somehow got sent too? To John Ambrose McLaren. Kenny from camp. Lucas Krapf.

Josh.

Oh my God; Josh.

I leap up from the floor. I must find that hatbox. I must find those letters.

I go back outside to the track. I do not see Chris anywhere; so, she is smoking behind the field house. I go straight over to Coach, who is sitting on the bleachers with his phone.

‘I can’t stop throwing up;’ I whimper. I double over and cradle my arms to my stomach. ‘Can I please go to the nurse’s office?’

Coach barely looks up from his phone. ‘Sure.’

As soon as I am out of his eye line, I make a run for it. The gym’s my last period of the day, and my house is only a couple of miles from school. I run like the wind. I do not think I have ever run so hard or so fast in my life, and I never will again. I ran so hard; a couple of times; I must stop because I felt like I was going to throw up.

-And-

Then, I remember the letters and Josh, and Up close; your face was not so much handsome as beautiful, and I am off and running again. As soon as I get home, I dash upstairs and go into my closet for my hatbox. It is not sitting on the top shelf where it usually sits.

It is not on the floor, or behind my stack of board games. It is not anywhere. I get on my hands and knees and start rifling through piles of sweaters, shoe boxes, and craft supplies. I look in places it could not be because it is a hatbox and it is big, but I look anyway. My hatbox is nowhere.

I collapsed onto the floor. This is a horror movie. My life has become a horror movie.

Next to me my phone buzzes. It is Josh. Where are you? Did you get a ride home with Chris?

I turn my phone off and go down to the kitchen and call Margot on the house phone.

It is still my first impulse; to go to her when things get bad. I will just leave out the Josh part of it and focus on the Marcel part. She will know what to do; she always knows what to do.

I am all set to burst out; Gogo; I miss you so much and everything is a mess without you, but when she picks up the phone; she sounds sleepy, and I can tell that I have woken her up. 'Were you sleeping?' I ask.

'No; I was just lying down,' she lies.

'Yes; you were sleeping! Gogo: it is not even ten o'clock over there! Wait; is it? Did I calculate wrong again?'

'No; you are right. I am just so tired. I have been up since five, because-' Her voice trails off. 'What's wrong?'

I hesitate. It is better not to burden Margot with all of this. I mean; she just got to college- this is what she is working for; this is her dream come true. She should be having fun and not worrying about how things are going back home without her. Besides, what would I even say? I wrote a bunch of love letters, and they got sent out; including one I wrote to your boyfriend? 'Nothing's wrong;' I say. I am doing what Margot would do, which is figure it out on my own.

'It sounds like something's wrong.' Margot yawns. 'Tell me.'

'Go back to sleep; Gogo.'

'Okay;' she says, yawning again.

We hung up and I made myself an ice cream sundae right in the carton- chocolate sauce; whipped cream; chopped nuts. The works. I take it back up to my room and eat it lying down. I feed it to myself like medicine; until I have eaten the whole thing; every bite.

A LITTLE WHILE LATER wakes up Kellie standing at the foot of my bed. 'You've got ice cream on your sheets;' she informs me.

I groan and turn over to my side. 'Kellie; that's the least of my problems today.'

'Daddy wants to know if you want chicken for dinner or hamburgers. My vote is chicken.'

I sit straight up. Daddy's home! He knows something. He was on that cleaning binge, throwing things away. He spirited my hatbox away somewhere safe, and the Marcel letter was just an unfortunate fluke! I jump out of bed and run downstairs, my heart thumping hard in my chest.

My dad was in his study; wearing his glasses and reading a thick book on Audubon paintings.

All in one breath I ask; 'Daddy-have-you-seen-my-hatbox?'

He looks up; his face is hazy, and I can tell he is still with Audubon's birds and not at all focused on my frenzied state. 'What box?'

'My teal hatbox Mommy gave me!'

'Oh; that-;' he says, still looking confused. He takes off his glasses. 'I do not know. It might have gone the way of your roller skates.'

'What does that mean? What are you even saying?'

'Goodwill... There is a slight possibility I took them to Goodwill.'

When I gasp; my dad says defensively; 'Those roller skates do not even fit you anymore. They were just taking up space!'

I sink to the floor. 'They were pink, and they were vintage, and I was saving them for Kellie - and that is not even the point. I do not care about roller skates. I care about my hatbox! Daddy: you do not even know what you have done.' My dad gets up and tries to pull me off the floor. I resisted him and flopped onto my back like a goldfish.

'Lara Jean; I do not even know that I got rid of it. Come on; let us have a look around the house; all right? Do not let us panic yet.'

'There is only one place it could be, and it is not there. It is gone.'

'Then I'll check Goodwill tomorrow on my way to work;' he says, squatting down next to me. He is giving me that look- sympathetic but also exasperated and mystified; How; is it possible that my sane and reasonable DNA created such a crazy daughter?

'It is too late. It is too late. There is no point.'

'What was in that box that's so important?'

I can feel my ice cream sundae curdling in my stomach. For the second time, today I feel like I am going to be sick. 'Only everything.'

He grimaces... 'I didn't realize your mother had given it to you or that it was so important.' As he retreats off to the kitchen; he says, 'Hey; how about an ice cream sundae before dinner? Will that cheer you up?'

Continued- 2

As if dessert before dinner would be the thing that cheers me up as if I am Kellie's age and not sixteen going on seventeen. I do not even bother dignifying it with an answer. I just lie there on the floor, my cheek against the cool hardwood. Besides, there is not any ice cream left anyway, but he will find that out soon enough.

I do not even want to think about Josh reading that letter. I do not even want to think about it.

It is terrible.

After dinner (chicken; per Kellie's request); I am in the kitchen doing dishes when I hear the doorbell ring. Daddy opens the door, and I hear Josh's voice. 'Hey; Dr. Covey. Is Lara Jean around?'

Oh; no! No- no-no-no. I cannot see Josh. I know I must at some point; but not today.

Not right this second. I cannot. I just cannot.

I drop the plate back into the sink and make a run for it; out the back door; down the porch steps; across the backyard to Pearce's yard. I scrambled up the wooden ladder and into Carolyn Pearce's old treehouse. I have not been to this treehouse since middle school. We used to hang out up here sometimes, at night. Chris, Genevieve, Allie, and me; the boys a couple of times.

I peek through the wooden slats; crouched in a ball; waiting until I see Josh walk back to his house. When I am sure he is inside, I climb down the ladder and run back to mine. I sure have been doing a lot of running today. I am exhausted; now that I think of it.

I WAKE UP THE NEXT morning renewed. I am a girl with a plan. I am just going to have to avoid Josh forever. It is as simple as that. And if not forever; then at least until this dies-a down and he forgets about my letter. There is still the tiny chance he never even got it.

Whoever mailed Marcel's only sent the one! You never know.

My mom always said optimism was my best trait. Both Chris and Margot have said it is annoying, but to that; I say looking on the bright side of life never killed anybody.

When I get downstairs, Daddy and Kellie are already at the table eating toast.

I make myself a bowl of cereal and sit down with them.

‘I’m going to stop by Goodwill on my way to work,’ my dad says, crunching on his toast from behind his newspaper. ‘I’m sure the hatbox will turn up there.’

‘Your hatbox is missing?’ Kellie asks me. ‘The one Mommy gave you?’

I nod and shovel cereal into my mouth. I must leave soon or else I will risk running into Josh on my way out.

‘What was in the box; anyway?’ Kellie asks.

‘That’s private,’ I say. ‘All you need to know is the contents are precious to me.’

‘Will you be mad at Daddy if you never get the hatbox back?’ Kellie answers her question before I can. ‘I doubt it. You never stay mad for long.’

This is true. I can never stay mad for long.

Peering over his newspaper, he asks Kellie; ‘What in the world was in that hatbox?’

Kellie shrugs. Her mouth is full of toast; she says, ‘Probably more French berets?’

‘No; not more berets.’ I give them both a mean look. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me; I don’t want to be late for school.’

‘Aren’t you leaving a little early?’

‘I’m taking the bus today,’ I say. And every day until Margot’s car is fixed, but they do not need to know that.

THE WAY IT HAPPENS IS a strange sort of serendipity. A slow-motion train wreck...

For something to go this colossally wrong; everything must intersect and collide at the exact right; or in this case; wrong; moment.

If the bus driver had not had trouble backing out of the cul-de-sac; taking four extra minutes to get to school, I never would have run into Josh.

If Josh's car had started up and he had not had to get a jump from his dad; he would not have been walking by my locker.

And if Marcel had not had to meet Ms. Wooten in the guidance office, he would not have been walking down the hallway ten seconds later. And this whole thing would not have happened. But it did.

I am at my locker; the door is jammed, and I am trying to yank it open. I finally got the door loose and there's Josh, standing right there.

'Lara Jean -' He has this shell-shocked, confused expression on his face.

'I have been trying to talk to you since last night. I came by, and nobody could find you...' He holds out my letter. 'I do not understand. What is this?'

'I don't know;' I hear myself say. My voice feels far away. It is like I am floating above myself; watching it all unfold.

'I mean; it's from you; right?'

'Oh; wow.' I take a breath and accept the letter. I fight the urge to tear it up.

'Where did you even get this?'

'It got sent to me in the mail.' Josh jams his hands into his pockets. 'When did you write this?'

'Like; a long time ago;' I say. I let out a fake little laugh. 'I do not even remember when. It might have been middle school.' Excellent job; Lara Jean. Keep it up.

Slowly he says, 'Right - but you mention going to the movies with Margot, Mike, and Ben that time. That was a couple of years ago.'

I bit my bottom lip. 'Right. I mean; it was a long time ago. In the grand scheme of things.' I can feel tears coming on so close that if I break concentration even for a second; if I waver; I will cry and that will make everything worse if such a thing is possible. I must be cool, breezy, and nonchalant now. Tears would ruin that.

Josh is staring at me so hard that I must look away. 'So then - Do you - or did you have feelings for me or...?'

'I mean; yes; sure; I did have a crush on you at one point; before you and Margot ever started dating. A million years ago.'

‘Why didn’t you ever say anything? Because of Lara Jean - God. I do not know.’ His eyes are on me, and they are confused, but there is something else; too. ‘This is crazy. I feel blindsided.’

The way he is looking at me now; I am suddenly in a time warp back to a summer day when I was fourteen and he was fifteen, and we were walking home from somewhere.

He was looking at me so intently that I was sure he was going to try to kiss me. I got nervous; so, I picked a fight with him, and he never looked at me like that again.

Until this moment.

Do not. Just please, do not.

Whatever he is thinking; whatever he wants to say; I do not want to hear it. I will do anything; anything; not to hear it.

Before he can; I say, ‘I’m dating someone.’

Josh’s jaw goes slack. ‘What?’

What?

‘Yup, I’m dating someone; someone I really- like; so please don’t worry about this.’ I wave the letter like it is just paper; trash; like once, upon a time I did not pour my heart on this page. I stuffed it into my bag. ‘I was confused when I wrote this; I do not even know how it got sent out. Honestly, it is not worth talking about.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bellboys snickered at me. Tom impersonated Noah, making his voice high-pitched. ‘Leave off. Do not talk to my girlfriend- he said all snotty.’ ‘Yeah- you heard me, off leave- yah-ow, I said in my English way of speaking.’ Harry yelped. ‘Otherwise, I’ll beat you up with my dollie.’ Rallie started toward the Bell house, headed downward. Abundant, Noah’s beliefs and feelings. As usual, he had not made it as good as. ‘Da- Don’t go yet,’ Harper shouted to Rallie, paying no attention to her pain in the romp brothers. ‘Call home and just see if you can spend the night.’

'I better not- not so- do,' Rallie said. 'I've just got to get my knapsack from inside.' 'Ah- hey- what up for me,' Noah said, clutching Jann. He headed for the canopy way door and got there just as it shut in his face. 'You overlooked... no?' Inside Harper's house was always a mess. Discarded clothes, half-empty cups, and sports apparatus covered most surfaces. Her parents seemed to have given up on the house around the same time they gave up on trying to administer any rules about dinners and bedtimes and fighting around Harper's eighth birthday when one of her brothers threw her cake with its still-lit birthday candles at her older sister.

Now there were no more birthday parties. There were not even family meals, just packages of canned ravioli topped with macaroni and cheese, and tins of sardines in the pantry so-o, that the kids could feed themselves long before their mother and father would come home from work and fell, exhausted, into their bed. They were old-bought from Salvation army-with big shiny heads, different-colored tails, and frizzy hair. HARPER SET DOWN ONE OF THE MERMAID DOLLIES CLOSE to the stretch of asphalt road, that represented the Murkiest Sea. They would crash the ship against the shallows if they could, lure the crew into the sea, and eat the pirates with their jagged teeth.

Their silly plastic smiles, hiding their lethal intentions Noah- Ethan could almost imagine- their flippers lashing back and forth as they waited for the boat to get closer. Noah rummaged through his bag of action figures. He pulled out the pirate with the two cutlasses and placed him gently at the center of the boat-shaped paper they had considered down with the passageway of the shingle. Without gravel, Neptune's Pearl was likely to blow away in the early autumn wind. He could almost believe he was not on the scrubby pasture in front of Harper's ramshackle house with the sagging siding, but aboard a real ship, with salt spray stinging his face, on his way to the voyage. Noah had an unusual way of speaking for each of his figures. He was not sure that anyone but him could tell his voices apart, but he felt different when he talked to them. 'We're going to have to lash ourselves to the mast,' Noah said, as Tommy sings the Blade, captain of Neptune's Pearl. 'You think Jon's guards will be waiting for us in Blue falls?' Rallie made Girl Jann ask. She was loud and wild, almost nothing like Rallie, who chafed under the thumb of her overprotective grandmother, but did it quietly.

Rallie's braids spilled in front of her amber eyes as she moved a hand-covered wood doll- Jann figures closer to the center of the boat. Girl Jann was a thief who had begun traveling with Tommy sings the Blade after she had been unsuccessful in picking his pocket. It was something he never wanted to give up.

He would go on playing like this constantly, no matter how old they got, although he did not see how that was possible.

It was already hard sometimes. That was why Noah loved playing: those moments where it seemed like he was retrieving some other world, one that felt real as anything. 'He might catch us,' said Noah, grinning at her. 'But he will never hold us. Nothing will. We are on a mission for the Great Princess, and we will not be stopped.' He had not expected to say those words until they came out of his mouth, but they felt right. They felt like Tommesings's true thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

'You can knot ropes to keep you safe, but no boat can pass through these waters unless a sacrifice is given to the deep,' Harper made one of the mermaids say. 'Freely or reluctantly. If one of your crew does not spring into the sea, the sea will pick her sacrifice. That is the mermaid's jinx.' It was said... Harper tucked windblown strands of red hair behind her ears and regarded Noah and Rallie very seriously.

She was insignificant and violent, with speckles thick enough to remind Noah of the stars at night. She adored nothing better than overseeing the story and had a sense of how to make a moment melodramatic. That was why she was the finest at playing anti-heroes. Rallie and Noah exchanged a look. Were the mermaids telling the truth? Harper was not supposed to make up rules like that-ones that no one else had agreed to-but Noah objected only when he did not like them. A curse seemed like it could be fun. 'But just then,' said Harper ominously, moving one of the mermaids to the edge of the ship, 'webbed fingers grab Girl Jann's ankle, and the mermaid pulls her over the side of the boat. She is gone.'

'We'll all go down together before we lose a single member of this crew,' he fake-shouted in Tommesings's voice. 'We're on a mission for the Great Princess, and we fear her curse more than yours.' 'You can't do that!' Rallie said. 'I was lashed to the mast.' Rallie groaned, as though Harper was being especially annoying. Which she kind of was. 'Well, Girl Jann was in the middle of the boat. Even if she were not lashed, a mermaid could not get to her without crawling on board.' 'You didn't specify that you were,' Harper told her. 'Tommesings suggested it, but you didn't say whether or not you did it.'

'If Jann gets pulled over the side, I'm going after her,' Noah said, plunging Tommesings into the gravel water. 'I meant it when I said no one gets left behind.'

'I didn't get pulled over the side,' Rallie insisted.

As they continued arguing two of Harper's brothers walked out of the house, letting the screen door slam behind them. They observed over and started to snicker. The older of the two, Tom, pointed directly at Noah and said something under his breath. His younger brother laughed.

Noah felt his expression heat. He did not know the reason they knew anyone at his middle school, but still. If any of his colleagues found out that, at twelve, he was still playing with action figures, basketball would become a lot less fun. School might get bad too.

'Close your eyes to them,' Harper declared loudly. 'They're BUTTS.'

'All we were going to say is that Rallie's grandma called,' Tom said, his face a parody of hangdog incorruptibility.

He and Harry had the same tomato-red hair as their sister, but they were not much like her in any other way that Noah might understand.

They, along with their firstborn sister, were always in trouble fighting, cutting school, smoking, and other stuff.

The Bell kids were considered hoodlums in town and, Harper aside, they seemed intent on doing what they could to uphold that character.

'Old magnates say that you need to be home before shadowy, and for us to be sure to tell you not to forget or make excuses.'

'She seems rough, Rallie.' The words were supposed to be nice, but you could tell from the sickly-sweet way Tom talked that he was not being nice at all.

Rallie stood up and fleecy off her skirt. The orange glow of the setting sun bronzed her skin and turned her glossy box braids metallic.

Her eyes narrowed some. Her appearance wavered between confusion and anger.

Boys had been harassing her ever since she had hit ten, gotten bends, and started looking a lot older than she was.

Noah hated the way Tom talked to her like he was making fun of her without really saying anything bad, but he never knew what to say to stop it either.

'Leave off,' Noah told them.

Noah felt envious every time he thought of that kind of self-determination, and Rallie loved it even more than he did. She spent as many nights there as her grandmother permissible. Harper's parents did not seem to notice, which worked out flawlessly.

He undone and pushed open the screen door and went inside.

Rallie was standing in front of the dusty, old, locked display cabinet in the corner of the Bell living room, peering in at all the things Harper's mother had forbidden Harper, on pain of death and dismemberment, from touching.

That was where the dollie they called the Great Princess of all their realms was surrounded, next to a blown-glass vase from Savers that had turned out to be vintage something or other. The Princess had been picked up by Harper's mother at a tag sale, and she insisted that one day she was going to go on Antiques Live broadcast, sell it, and move them all to Sam.

The Princess was a bone China dollie of a child with straw-gold curls and paper-white skin- and the soul of a young girl within. Her eyes were closed, lashes a fair-haired fringe against her cheek. She wore a long gown, a thin fabric dotted with something dark that might be a fungus. Noah could not remember when exactly they had decided that she was the Great Princess, only that they would all feel like she was inspecting them, even though her eyes were closed, and that Harper's sister had been terrified of her.

One time, Harper had woken in the middle of the night and found her sister with whom she shared a room- sitting upright in bed. 'If she gets out of the case, she'll come for us,' her sister had said, unqualified faced, before slumping back down on her pillow. No amount of calling to the other side of the room had seemed to stir her. Harper had tossed and turned, unable to sleep for the rest of the night. But in the morning, her sister had told her that she did not recollect saying whatsoever, that it must have been a terrifying dream, and that their mother needed to get rid of that dollie. I felt like I could not sleep with that dollie looking right through me as if she were alive and wanting me in some creepy way- she was feeling me... and I was feeling uncomentable... by it all. Subsequently, to escape being entirely frightened, Noah, Harper, and Rallie added the dollie to their game of play. Conferring to the legend they had created, the Princess ruled over the whole enchilada from her beautiful glass tower high up. She influenced anyone to put her mark on who refuses to comply with her guidelines. When that occurred, nothing would go right for them until

they regained her kindness. They would be convicted of crimes they did not commit. Their friends and family would sicken and decease. Ships would sink, and squalls would strike.

The one thing the Princess could not do, though, was escape. 'Are- you all, right?' Noah asked Rallie. She seemed fascinated by the case, staring into it as though she could see approximately- Noah could not. Lastly, Rallie turned around, her eyes shining. 'My grandmother wants to know where I am every second. She wants to pick out my clothes for me and grumbles about my braids all the time. I just am so-o over it. Besides yours truly do not know if she is going to let me be in the play this year, even though yours truly got a good part- but...? Uh? She cannot see so well after twilight, and she does not want to drive me home. I am just so tired of all her rules, as well as it is like the older, I get, the poorer she gets.'

Noah had heard most of that before, but usually, Rallie just sounded resigned to it. 'What about your aunt? Could you ask her to pick you up after rehearsals?'

Rallie snorted. 'She has never forgiven Aunt Linda for trying to get custody of me back when. Brings it up on every holiday. It has made her super paranoid.'

Mrs. Mag Harry grew up in the Philippines and was fond of telling anyone who would listen how different things were over there. According to her, Filipino teenagers worked hard, never talked back, and did not draw on their hands with ink pens or want to be actors, like Rallie did. They did not get as tall as Rallie was getting either.

Rallie laughed. 'Yes, okay. Made her extra-super paranoid.'

'Made her super paranoid?' Noah asked. 'Hey.' Harper came into the living room from outside, holding the rest of their figures. 'Are you sure you can't stay over, Rallie?' Rallie shook her head, plucked Girl Jann out of Noah's hand, and went down the hallway to Harper's room. 'I was just getting my stuff.'

'Her grandmother,' he said, with a shrug. 'You know.' Harper turned impatiently to Noah for an explanation. She never liked it when she was not part of a conversation and hated the idea that her friends had kept any secrets from her, even stupid ones. 'Otherwise, maybe she'll just make him do another quest.' He thought about it for a moment and grinned. 'Maybe she wants him to get skilled adequate with a blade to break her out of that cabinet.'

Harper exhaled and beheld at the cabinet. After a moment, she spoke. 'If you finish this quest, the Princess will lift the curse on Tommesings. He could go home and finally solve the mystery of where he came from.' They walked down the hall to Harper's room just as Rallie came out, backpacking over the left shoulder. 'Don't even think about it,' Harper alleged, only half-joking.

'Come on.'

'See you tomorrow then,' she said as she slid past them. She did not look happy, but Noah thought she might just be upset that she was leaving early and that they were going to be hanging out without her. He and Harper did not usually play the game when Rallie was not there. But lately, Rallie was more bothered by him and Harper spending time alone together, which he did not understand.

An odd and ends of her sister's old Barbies were on top of a bookshelf, waiting for Harper to try to fix their melted arms and chopped hair. The bookshelves were overfull with make-believe paperbacks and overdue library books, some of them on Greek myths, some on mermaids, and a few on homegrown hauntings. Noah thought about drawing a map of their kingdoms-one with the seas, the islands, and the whole kit and caboodle-and wondered where he could get a gigantic enough piece of paper.

Noah walked into Harper's room and flopped down on her grayish-shag rug. Harper used to share the room with her younger sister, and piles of her sister's outgrown clothes still endured spread out in meanings, along with an assemblage of used makeup and notebooks covered in stickers, plus indecipherable with lyrics.

He ran down the steps, cutting her off in mid-reproach. 'Where is my carrier- bag? The action figures. The models and early made cars. All of them. They are not upstairs.'

'Noah?' she called up from down the stairs. 'That's the second time you've banged-'

'Nope, Mom, they're gone.' Noah looked over at his father and was surprised to see the expression on his dad's face-an appearance he was not sure how to understand.

'I did not take anything out of your room. I bet it is underneath one of the element-size piles of laundry up there.' She smiled as she got down a stack

of plates, but he did not smile back at me. Why...? 'Clean your room, and I bet the bag will turn up.'

She followed Noah's gaze, turning to Noah's father, her voice incredibly quiet. 'Evelyn?'

'Where are they?' Noah asked, a hazardous edge to his voice.

'He's twelve years old, playing with a bunch of crap,' he said; getting up from the sofa, and raising his hands in a pacifying way. 'He must grow up. It was time he got rid of them. He should be absorbed with friends, listening to music, goofing off. Noah, trust me when I say this to you-you will not miss them.'

'Those figures were mine- I tell yah!' Noah was so angry about this- he could hardly think about it. His voice shook with anger and frustration. 'They were mine- MINE.'

'Forget it- shit, they're gone,' his pop said. 'There's no point in throwing a hissy fit.'

'Somebody's- like- needs to get you ready for the real world, kid...' said his father, his face flushing red. 'Be mad all you want, but it has done. Done... Do you comprehend me? It is time you grew up. End of discussion.'

'Evelyn, what were you thinking?' Noah's mother demanded. 'You can't just go making decisions without talking-'

'Oh, don't be so melodramatic,' his dad said.

'Where are they?' Noah snarled at him with a look of hate. He had never talked to his father this way, never talked to an adult this way. 'What did you do with all of the stuff?'

'Evelyn!' His mother's voice was threatening.

His father stopped for an instant; his expression was suddenly undefined. 'I threw them out... okay- out- I am sorry about it- but- o-well. I did not think you would be this upset. They are just plastic-'

'GIVE THEM BACK NOW- NOW!' Noah roared. He was out of the switch, and he did not care about looking like a baby about it.

'In the garbage they are?' Noah ran dashing out the door, and down the old worn steps. Two big, dented metal garbage cans were at the end of the yard by the driveway, resting on the fence tipped some. He pulled off the lid of one

with numb fingers, then threw it against the road with a clang and it rolled down the hill. GO after that- NO!

Please, he thought. Please- please- please- please- please.

It felt like a punch to the gut. Tommy sings that Allyson and Jasper, and all the others were dead. Without them, all their stories would be dead too. He wiped his face against the sleeve of his shirt.

But the inside of the can was unfilled. The trash truck had previously come and gone. Then he twisted back to the house. His father was silhouetted in the entranceway.

'Hey, I'm sorry,' he said.

'Don't bother trying to be my father any longer,' Noah said, strolling up the front steps and past him. 'It's too late for that, it was too late- like years ago- it was- so-o.'

'Noah,' his mother said, her hand accomplishment out to touch his shoulder, but he walked past her.

His father just stared at him; his face troubled.

In his room, Noah looked up at the ceiling, trying to noiseless the feelings inside him. He did not complete his homework. He did not eat dinner, even though his mother carried up a plate of food for him and set it down on his desk- he left it to sit being a brat. He did not change out of his clothes into his pajamas, he just sat there in his undies. He did not cry- he just looked miserable.

She took another sip of coffee... now do stars... 'He called the dump, too. Asked them if there was any way to get your toys back. He even obtainable to drive over there and look for them himself- but there was no way. I am sorry. I know that he did a stupid thing, but he honestly tried to fix it, sweetheart.'

Noah tossed and turned, concentrating on the gloom moving across the ceiling and on the anger that seemed to grow instead of lessening. He was angry. At his father, for destroying the game. At his mother, for letting his father back into their lives. And that anger coagulated inside his belly and crawled up his throat until it felt like it might choke him. Until he was sure that there was no way he could ever tell anyone what had happened without all his anger spilling out and engulfing everything.

At Harper and Rallie, who had not lost anything. And at himself, for acting like a little kid, just like his dad had said, and for caring about Tommy singing the Blade and a bunch of plastic toys as though they were real people.

And the only way not to tell anyone was to end the game.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, NOAH PUSHED HIS LIMP CEREAL around in a bowl of milk as his mom poured herself a second cup of coffee. Light filtered in through the dirty windowpane to make the scarred wood on the kitchen table show the pale watermarks from wet mugs and the greenish smudge where Noah had once drawn a spaceship in permanent marker. He traced the faint outline of it with a finger.

'Your father called the trash company last night,' his mother said.

Noah blinked and looked up at her.

Noah felt weirdly numb, as though everything that happened was on a slight delay. He knew what she was saying was supposed to be important, but somehow, he could not make it matter. He felt tired, too, as though he had not slept at all, even though he had slept so deeply that the ringing of his alarm had seemed to bring him up from the bottom of something deep and dark. He had had to fight through his dreams to wake.

'Okay,' he said because there was nothing else to say.

'Tonight, we are going to sit down and have a family discussion. Your dad was brought up by an extremely strict man and, as much as he hates it, he acts like his father sometimes. It is what he knows, honey.'

Noah shrugged and put a scoop of soggy cereal in his mouth to keep from telling her that he would rather be hung upside down by his toes over a blazing fire than talk to his father. Still chewing, he grabbed his backpack and started school.

'We can discuss it later,' his mother said with a false cheer, moments before he slammed his way out the door.

But this morning he hurried along the side of the street, glad to be alone. He kept his head down as he stalked along, kicking rocks and chunks of loose asphalt into the road. When he saw the school building in the distance, he wondered what would happen if he just kept going, the same way his father had

left them three years ago. If he just kept walking until he came to a new place where no one knew him, lied about his age, and got a job delivering newspapers or something... The chilly air felt like a slap in the face. He was relieved not to see Harper and Rallie on the sidewalk. They all lived close enough that sometimes they ran into each other on the way to school, and they usually walked home together.

Well, he did not know quite what he would do after that.

If a story idea came to him, he concentrated on something else until it went away.

By the time he made up his mind to go to school, he was late. Mr. Lockwood glowered at him as he slunk into class just after the bell. He sat at his desk and drew nothing in the margins of his notebook.

At lunch, his sandwich tasted like cardboard. He threw out his apple.

After school, he told the coach he was too sick to go to practice, but really, it was just that he did not want to. He did not want to do anything.

A few minutes later Rallie caught up with him, the slap of her shoes on the pavement heralding her approach. He felt like an idiot for taking the same old route and not expecting to see any of his friends. He started walking home, thinking he could sit in front of the television until Mom got home from work, then tell her the same thing he told the coach. She was wearing a Jon T-shirt with a creature on it that was half brontosaurus, half kitten. Her braids were pulled back into a headband, and little feather earrings hung from her ears. 'Noah?' Rallie asked, out of breath from running.

But that seemed forever ago, and so much had happened since. He almost did not feel like the same person.

He had no idea what to say to her. He wanted to ask her about the day before when she was giggling with her friends-he wanted to know why she had not talked to him.

He was like a random generator of weirdness. 'Hey,' he said. 'Harper wanted me to tell you to walk slow. She is getting a book from the librarian.'

A kid named Aubrey waved to them, walking in their direction. He had big glasses and was always saying crazy things.

Then one of them would ask, 'Want to play?' like always. And he would have to say something. 'Oh,' Noah said, feeling doomed. He knew what would happen next. One by one the mass of kids who walked home together would gather and then peel away into clumps headed in different directions until it was just Harper and Rallie and him.

'You, okay?' Rallie asked.

'Yes,' said Aubrey. 'You do not look so good, Noah. Somebody walk over your grave?'

He blinked a couple of times. At least Aubrey was acting like his normal crazy self. That was one thing that was not going to change. 'What?'

'No,' Noah said. His foot sent a few leaves spiraling up into the air. Talking about graves made him think about walking home the night before when he had thought he heard the wind howling at his heels. He shivered. 'So, my grave is going to be in front of Thomas Peebles Middle School? That is so-o lame.'

'That is what my grandpa always said. You never heard that?'

Rallie rolled her eyes. 'It is a saying. It means somewhere someone is stepping on the place where you are going to be buried.' 'It doesn't mean that you're going to be buried here.'

'So, it could be any old place?' Noah asked, shaking his head. 'How does that help to know?'

'It's not supposed to help,' Aubrey said. 'It's just supposed to be true.'

Her hair was in coppery pigtails, and her eyeliner looked smudged on one eye like she had forgotten it was there and rubbed over it. 'What are you guys talking about?' Harper asked, bound to them. She had on a black sweater and was bouncing on her Jon Chucks, one of the pink laces untied and dragging muddily behind her.

Harper looked over at Rallie and raised her eyebrows. 'Nothing like nothing or nothing like something?'

'Nothing,' Noah said with a shrug.

He was sure that they used to all speak the same language a year ago. Rallie shook her head and smiled, but then turned her smile down at the pavement like she was embarrassed. Noah had no idea what was going on. He

wondered if it had to do with yesterday and the giggling but could not think of how to ask. Sometimes it seemed to him that girls spoke a different language, but he could not figure out when they had learned it.

'We're talking about superstitions,' said Aubrey. 'Like how stepping where someone's grave is going to make them shudder involuntarily.'

He always talked with big words, like a textbook. Superstitions. Shudder. Involuntarily. Some kids said it was because his mother was a part-time teacher over at the college, but Noah thought that was just how Aubrey was.

Wait, no, I do remember! Harry pushed me into the backyard, and I whipped a branch at him. The branch got him good, right above the eye. He was bleeding like crazy, so-o even though he started it, I was the one who got in trouble.

I stomped on cracks all up and down the block. And the next day, she slipped into the garden and sprained her ankle.' 'Like stepping on a crack is supposed to break your mother's back?' Harper asked. 'I tried that when I was little. I was so mad at Mom, but I do not even remember why now.

Harper laughed. 'It is not like she broke her back. I mean, it was just a coincidence that she fell. But it scared me at the time. I thought I was a powerful enchanter or something.'

Noah could see him mentally filing that away with all his other oddball stories. 'No way,' Aubrey said.

'And you avoided cracks for years after,' Rallie said. 'Remember that? You would be crazy careful, always putting your feet sideways and going up on your tiptoes. You swerved around like a dumb butt.'

Dumb butt- Noah said automatically. For some reason, words were funnier smashed together. Rallie echoed, spinning on one toe, and then stumbling a little. 'Exactly.'

They passed the old Episcopalian church with the big spire as they headed down Main Street.

'That's a good portmanteau,' said Aubrey. Noah nodded, the way he usually did when he had no idea what Aubrey was talking about.

This was the town he had grown up in, and even though it was small and a lot of the stores on Main Street were closed, even though windows were boarded up and rentals went unrented, Noah was used to the place.

They walked past the barbershop, the pizza place where Noah had birthday parties when he was little, the bus station next to the post office, and the big old graveyard on the hill. Noah had followed this exact route many times... his fingers curled in his mother's when he was little and then gripping the handlebars of his bike when he was older, and now on foot to and from school.

He could not imagine living anywhere else, which was a real obstacle in imagining running away. 'For a while, my parents moved us around a lot, and there was this one apartment we lived in that was haunted. I swear-when the ghost was in the room, the air would get cold, even in the middle of summer.

'That stuff is real,' Aubrey said. And there was one spot that was always ice-cold. You could put a space heater on top of it, and it would not warm up. That is where somebody died. The land-Girl even said so.'

'Did you ever actually see the ghost?' Rallie asked. Her cheeks were pink from the wind, and her eyes were bright. 'Have you ever heard this one? When you drive past a cemetery, you must hold your breath. If you do not, the spirits of the newly dead can get in your body through your mouth, and then they can possess you.'

Aubrey shook his head. 'No, but sometimes he would move things. Like my mom's keys. Mom would yell for the ghost to give them back, and then, nine times out of ten, she would find them right after. Mom says you must know how to talk to ghosts, or they will walk all over you.'

Harper smiled like she did when she was anticipating revealing something exciting-a twist to a story, a shocking turn, a villain's big move.

Noah shivered, the hairs on his neck rising. Without meaning to, he imagined the taste of a ghost, like an acrid mouthful of smoke. He spat in the dirt, trying to untaste the idea.

Noah thought again about the night before and the feeling of something right behind him, breathing on his neck, something that was about to reach out and grasp for him with its cold fingers.

'Ugh,' Rallie said into the silence that followed the end of Harper's story. 'You made me hold my breath! I was just trying not to inhale. Anyway, we already passed the graveyard-should you not have told us the story before we passed it? Unless you wanted us to get possessed.'

The story was like that, grabbing hold of him and promising that he would think about it every time he was near a graveyard.

'Maybe I am not Harper anymore. I did not know how to hold my breath and I learned the hard way. A spirit possessed me and now it is warning you because it is too late. The spirits are already inside you- 'Harper kept smiling. She made her eyes wide and spoke in a flat, affectless tone. 'That is why it is a scary story. Because you cannot do the one thing that would protect you-you will never know if you held your breath long enough or let it out too soon. And you cannot hold your breath forever.'

'Come on, stop,' Rallie said, shoving Harper's shoulder. They both began to laugh.

'The smile was creepy,' said Noah. 'Anyone tell you that you have a creepy smile, Harper?' Aubrey laughed nervously along with them.

She looked incredibly pleased with herself.

They walked a few blocks more and then came to the place where Aubrey split off for home. He waved goodbye and headed off, cutting across a big lawn toward a trailer park.

CHAPTER FOUR

Then it was just Rallie, Harper, and Noah walking the few blocks to the development where their houses were clustered, all three identical from the outside. His heart started to speed up again and his legs turned to lead because there was no way to avoid the conversation that was coming, even though he wanted to with all his might.

He thought of the folded-up Questions, still in his backpack, and of how he had said Tommesings's nightmare was being buried alive. THE AIR WAS COOL, THE TREES BRIGHT WITH YELLOW and red leaves, and lawns thick with a wilted carpet of brown. A gust of air shook the branches above Noah and blew his bangs over his eyes. He pushed them back impatiently and looked up at the cloudless sky. He thought of all of them- all his characters, stuck in the duffel

bag, rats chewing at the edges. He thought of bugs crawling over them and trash dumped on top of them.

'I can't,' Noah said quickly. He had planned out a whole speech the night before, lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his room, but he could not remember any of it now. 'Hey,' said Rallie. 'Do you guys want to meet up? I have an idea for what might-' He took a deep breath and blurted out the only thing he could think of to say. 'I don't want to play anymore.'

Harper frowned in confusion. 'What are you talking about?'

'I've been busy with school and basketball and everything,' he said instead, his voice low. 'I mean; you guys can keep playing or whatever.'

For a moment, it seemed possible to take the words back, to tell Harper and Rallie what had happened. He could explain what his dad had done and how angry he was and how he had no idea what to do now except be angry. He could tell them how he did not want all the stories to remain unfinished. He could tell them how he felt like pieces of himself were gone, like part of him had been thrown out with his action figures.

'It is just that we are in the middle of something big. We went through the Gray Country and to the Blackest Sea. Couldn't we just finish this part?'

'You mean ever? Like you do not want to play ever again?' When Harper got upset, her neck would flush a blotchy red. He could see its coloring, as pink as her wind-whipped cheeks. She launched into a slightly desperate negotiation.

He had been looking forward to crossing swords with the leader of the mermaids, who knew the way to an ancient underwater city full of secrets-including the secret to completing the Princess's quest and lifting her curse-plus there was the promise of fighting sharks. There were even hints that they might find a clue to Tommy sings the Blade's parentage, plus the treasure of the Shark Prince-piles of gold and jewels so vast that Girl Jann had been questing after it since she had first heard the story as an orphan beggar child. Remembering how awesome it was going to be made every new thought about playing hurt like the back of a shoe rubbing against a burst blister.

Rallie looked stricken.

'We're too old anyway, don't you think?' he made himself say.

'We were,' Noah said, 'That's stupid,' Harper said. 'We weren't too old the day before yesterday.'

'It's because of your friends on the team, isn't it?' Rallie glanced over at Harper like they had had this conversation before. 'You think they're going to find out and hassle you.'

'You don't mean that,' Harper said.

'I don't think anything.' Noah sighed. 'I just don't want to play anymore.'

He forced the words out. 'I do.'

'Maybe we could just take a break,' Rallie said slowly. 'Do something else for a while.'

'And then maybe if you change your mind...'

'Sure,' he said with a shrug.

Before Girl Jann, Rallie's favorite character had been a Barbie named Aurora who had been raised by a herd of carnivorous horses. But on Monday morning, on the walk to school, Rallie explained that she had repainted an action figure from a thrift store over the weekend. She wanted to play with somebody new. Noah thought about the time that Rallie had first brought her Girl Jann dollie to a game—three months back.

Jann was different, all right. She was a thief who had grown up on the streets of the biggest city in all their kingdoms, called Haven. And she did not care about anything except for what she could steal and what fun she could have along the way.

Tommy Sings had to bail her out of situation after situation, until he finally got her to agree to stay aboard Neptune's Pearl. Jann was crazy. She got a ride on Tommesings's ship because she wanted a ride to the Shark Prince's treasure, but every time he docked, Girl Jann kept stealing from people, so they had been banned from landing in at least five unusual places.

'I'm not going to change my mind,' Noah said numbly.

Rallie's descriptions of Girl Jann's antics had made Noah laugh so hard that his stomach hurt. His stomach hurt now, too, but for a different reason.

Except then she wound up doing things like climbing the mast with a blindfold on, just to show off.

We are in the middle of a scene. What happens to everyone else? What happens to Girl Jann? Even if she gets away from the mermaids, what then?

'What about the crew?' 'But it doesn't make any sense,' Harper said, not willing to let him off that easily. 'You cannot just stop.'

'Maybe one of your people can take over as captain.' Noah hated the idea, but Neptune's Pearl was not a particular toy that one of them owned. It was just a cutout piece of paper, and there was no reason for him to hang on to it.

Tommy sings had promised Girl Jann that he would take her to the place marked on the map as the lair of the Shark Prince. He had sworn it on his honor and Neptune's Pearl.

'You figured it out. I do not care anymore.'

'Maybe they'll make her walk the plank,' said Harper.

'I don't care what happens,' Noah said, and all the simmering anger at his father, at this conversation, and everything bled into his voice then, turning it cruel.

Rallies were not allowed there, so it was a generous offer.

'Okay,' Rallie said, holding up her hands like she was surrendering. 'How about we walk over to the dirt mall? Whatever. See what is at the used bookstore and play arcade games in the movie theater lobby. Like I said, a break.'

Or bike over.

'I don't feel like it today,' Noah said. 'But thanks.' They went to his street, home. He picked up his pace.

'Did you finish the Questions?' Harper asked him.

He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder and shook his head. The note was folded and tucked away in the front zippered pocket, scribbled on, and illustrated, full of proof that he did care. He could not give it to her.

She held out her hand.

'I didn't answer them,' he said. 'What do you want?'

'Give me the paperback anyway. I will make up my answers.'

He frowned. 'I do not have them anymore. I lost them.'

'They're probably just in your bag, right?' Rallie said. 'You could look.'

'You lost them?' Harper yelled. He wondered if she was afraid of someone finding out what she had asked. He would have been.

'What happened?' Harper asked, grabbing his arm. 'What is so different suddenly? Why are you so different?'

'Sorry,' Noah mumbled. 'As I said, I don't know where they are.'

He turned to look at her. He had to get away before he said something that he could not take back. 'I do not know. I do not want to play, that is all.'

'Fine,' Harper said. 'Just bring your people over one last time. One final time. So that they can say goodbye to our people.'

'I can't,' he said. 'I just can't, Harper.'

'They're not real, you know.' He knew he was being a jerk, but it felt good to lash out, even if it was at the wrong person. 'They are not real, and they cannot want anything. Stop being such a loser. You cannot play pretend forever.'

'I just want to say good-bye.' The hurt on Harper's face was raw and so much like his own that it was hard to look at her. 'They would want that. They will miss Rose and Girl Jann and Aeryn and Lysander, even if you do not.'

Rallie sucked in her breath. The red blotches on Harper's neck had moved to her cheeks. She looked like she was about to cry or hit him; Noah was not sure which. With her blessing, all his crimes might be forgiven, his curse lifted, and Tommesings would be allowed to dock Neptune's Pearl anywhere he wanted.

Noah hesitated. The Great Princess, ruled over the Blue Hills, the Gray Country, the Land of the Witches, and the whole Blackest Sea. She would have information about Tommy's sings Blade's father.

The dollie was incredibly old, and according to Harper's mother-worth a lot of money. She would be worth a lot less if they touched her papery cotton dress or pawed at her brittle straw-gold curls. And if the Princess was freed from her cage, then who knew what that meant for the world? It was an important thing for Harper to promise-especially because her mother would be furious if Harper took the dollie out of the cabinet.

When she spoke, though, her voice was flat and grim. 'The Princess-what if I take her out of the cabinet? I know where my mom keeps the key. I will play her. She knows all the secrets, and she will give you whatever you want. Everything. If you come tomorrow, you can have everything you want.'

For a moment, he had forgotten that there was no gamer. It was an unpleasant shock to remember. No matter how tempting it was, Noah could not play. There were no Tommy singing Blade anymore.

'Sorry,' he said, turning toward his house with a shrug.

Harper made a strangled sound. Rallie said something under her breath.

Noah bent his head, closed his eyes, and kept walking.

'Your mother pointed out to me that if I want you to start acting like a grown-up, I can't keep treating you like a kid,' his father was saying, sounding overly sincere. 'She is right. I should not have tossed out your stuff, because it is my job to guide you toward the right choices, not make all those choices for you.'

THAT NIGHT, AT the kitchen table, Noah poked at his baked chicken. He was not hungry.

The tone of his father's voice made Noah think of last year when he had gotten into a fight at school. His mother had made him sit in the principal's office until he was ready to tell Grayson Fatter that he was sorry for punching him, even though Noah had not been sorry at all. Noah's father's apology sounded as forced as he had been.

'I know that it's hard to adjust to us being back together,' Mom said. 'But we are going to keep working on it. Noah, do you have anything you want to say?'

'Nope,' Noah said.

Finally, Noah nodded, because he did understand his father. He understood his want to make Mom happy. He understood not being sorry. It just did not make Noah forgive him.

'That's okay,' said his dad, getting up from the table and clapping Noah on the shoulder. 'We understand each other, don't we?'

An awkward silence stretched between them.

He tried not to think about the story, which would go on without him, flowing around the empty spaces where his characters used to be until they were swallowed up and forgotten. The next day,

Noah went to practice and tried to blot out thoughts of Harper and Rallie and his father by playing ball so aggressively that he got lectured by his coach and benched for the rest of practice.

He thought again about running away, but the more time passed, the more he realized that he had nowhere to go.

In the morning Noah asked her to drive him to school, and that afternoon he went home with Alex Rios. They played video games in Alex's finished basement on a bigger television than Noah had seen outside of a store.

Since his father was at the restaurant that night, his mother lets him eat ravioli from a can on the couch in front of the television. They did not talk much, although he caught her shooting him worried looks.

'Shut up,' Noah said, shoving Jack Lewis since he was standing closest.

'What?' Jack said. 'I didn't say anything.'

The day after that, Rallie walked up to Noah while he was shooting baskets at recess and pressed a note into his hand. A couple of the other guys yelled 'Go ask Rallie!' and 'Somebody's got a girlfriend!' as she walked off, which made her hunch her shoulders like she was braced against a hard wind.

The note was folded up in a square this time, with his name carefully printed in Jon ink. When he opened it, there were only three short sentences on the lined paper:

It is nothing, Noah told himself.

Something happened to the Princess. Go to the hermit's place by the Blue Hills after school. It is important.

Importance was underlined three times.

He thought of the Princess's fluttering lashes and the feeling of her closed eyes following him as he walked through the room.

This was just Harper and Rallie attempting to get him to show up so they could all have the same fight over again. They wanted him to play, and he

could not. There was nothing he could do except explain why it was over, and he could not bring himself to do that.

The Princess was not real, though, so nothing important could have happened to her.

'What did the note say?' Alex asked. 'She tells you that she wants your skinny body?'

Noah tore it in half and then in half again. 'Nah. She just wants my math homework.'

There was no practice after school that day, but he stayed late anyway, pretending there was. He managed to talk the coach into letting him shoot hoops in the gym, which he did methodically, alone, letting himself drown in the thump of the ball, the squeak of his sneakers, and the familiar smell of fresh floor wax and old sweat.

CHAPTER FIVE

The moon was high enough to give the room an eerie blue glow. He could make out the familiar shapes of his furniture. His black cat was uncurling and stretching her long sleek body, claws digging into the coverlet. She padded up to him, her yellow eyes full of reflected light.

NOAH WOKE IN THE DARKNESS OF HIS BEDROOM. He was not sure why, but his heart raced, adrenaline pumping through his body, as though something had activated his body's fight-or-flight response. He blinked in the dark, letting his eyes adjust.

'What is up?' he whispered to The Party, reaching out to pet her soft triangular head and press his thumb against her ear, folding it down and rubbing it. She butted against him and started to purr.

Bang- Tap-tap!

He jumped. The cat hissed, her white teeth flashing in the moonlight, and she jumped off the bed. Something small and hard had struck the window.

A sudden gust of wind made the branches outside shake and jitter. He could not help imagining the long, bony fingers of the trees scraping against the glass.

This was no echo of a dream, no made-up story. Something had hit the glass, smacking against one of the panes he could not see, one of the lower ones, hidden behind Jon's half-curtains.

Then one night-quite randomly-he fell asleep with his head above the covers like a normal person, and no monster got him. Over time he got spottier about observing his safety precautions until he routinely slept with an arm dangling off the side of his bed and his feet kicked free of the sheets.

When he was a little kid, he had a firm belief in universally observed monster rules. He had been sure, for example, that if he kept all parts of himself on the mattress and shrouded beneath blankets if he kept his eyes closed, and if he pretended to be asleep, then he would be safe. He did not know where he had gotten the idea from. He did remember his mother saying he would smother himself if he kept sleeping with his head under the comforter.

But right then, at the sound of the wind, for one panicky moment, all he wanted was to burrow under the blankets and never come out.

Tap- Tap - bang.

The thing hitting the window was just a branch, he told himself.

Or a neighbor cat trying to pick a fight with The Party.

Or an insomniac squirrel rattling around in the gutters.

Tap- Tap.

He was never going to be able to go back to sleep if he did not look. Noah slid out of bed, his bare feet padding over the carpet. Steeling himself and taking a deep breath, he pushed aside the curtain.

He was too surprised to shout. They had windblown hair and upturned faces, and, for a moment, he did not know them. But then he realized it was only Harper and Rallie, not zombie girls, witches, or ghosts. Rallie lifted her hand in a shy wave. Harper had another handful of pebbles and looked ready to throw them at him.

There were a few scattered pebbles on the roof tiles in front of his window. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was that when he looked past the roof, he saw two dark figures looking up at him from the moonlit lawn.

He let out his breath and waved back a little unsteadily. His hammering heart started to slow.

Harper beckoned to him. Come down, she was signaling.

Noah backed away from the window. Quietly he went to the closet and pushed his feet into a pair of sneakers. He pulled a sweater over his T-shirt and crept downstairs in his alligator pajama bottoms.

He thought the note that Rallie had passed to him and the way she had underlined it important, but he could not think of anything so important that it would lead them to sneak out of their houses on a Friday night. Rallie's grandmother would ground her for the rest of forever if she found out.

The under-cabinet lights in the kitchen were bright enough to stumble through, and he managed to find his coat on a hook in the entranceway. The microwave showed the time in blinking green numbers: three minutes past midnight. Noah shouldered his coat on and went outside, closing the door before the cat could slip through.

Harper and Rallie were waiting for him. The Party followed, mewling plaintively, hoping to be fed. 'Hey,' he whispered into the dark. 'What is going on? What happened?'

'Sh-h-h-h a,' Harper said. 'You will wake up everyone. Come on.'

'Where to?' He asked, looking back at his house. There was a light on in his parents' bedroom upstairs. Sometimes his mother stayed up late to read; sometimes she fell asleep with the light on. If she was still awake, the sound of them talking might carry up to her, but he wanted to know something before he just followed Rallie and Harper into the night.

'The Blue Hills,' Rallie said.

That was a junkyard that specialized in metal about half a mile from their houses. The owner bought everything from car parts to tin cans and, although no one was sure what he did with them other than let them rust in huge mounds on his property, they were an impressive sight. The stripped rods, machine parts, and batteries gleamed like mountains of blue, so that is why they had started calling it the Blue Hills. They had produced a whole storyline, including dwarves and trolls and a princess dollie that Harper had painted blue.

Noah jogged behind Harper and Rallie, the wind cutting through his thin pajamas, making him feel both cold and ridiculous. After a few minutes, Harper

pulled a flashlight out of her jacket and clicked it on. It illuminare only a narrow patch of grass and dirt, so she had to swing it back and forth to see much.

There was the same old high chain-link fence around the property that Noah remembered. And there was the same old abandoned shed that they had found a few summers ago and used as a clubhouse until Rallie's grandmother had found out about it and given them a speech about tetanus and how it led to something she called lockjaw. Noah was not sure lockjaw was a real thing, but he thought about it every time his neck felt stiff.

They had not been there since—or at least, he had not. He wondered if Harper and Rallie snuck out to the shed without him. They seemed full of secrets tonight. The only secret he had was one he wished he did not.

Rallie opened the creaky old door and went inside. He followed nervously.

'So, are you going to tell me what's going on?' Noah asked, sitting down across from Harper. The wood planks were cold under his pajama pants, and he shifted, trying to get comfortable.

Harper sat down on the splintery floor, cross-legged, setting the flashlight against her sneakers, so it lit her face. Then she unhooked her backpack from one shoulder, pulling it around onto her lap.

She unzipped her bag. 'You're going to laugh,' she said. 'But you shouldn't.'

He tried to suppress a shudder. Ghosts were not something you talked about in an abandoned shed at night. 'You are just trying to freak me out. This is stupid—'

He glanced over at Rallie. She was leaning against one wall of the shed. 'Harper saw a ghost,' she said.

Harper carefully took the bone China dollie from her backpack. Noah drew in his breath and went silent. The Princess's dull black eyes were open, her gaze boring into his own. He had always thought she was creepy looking, but in the reflected beam of the flashlight, she seemed demonic.

'The Princess,' Noah said unsteadily, forcing a sneer into his voice to cover his rising fear. 'So what? You brought me out here to see a dollie?'

Harper touched the doll's face. It was pure white, like a dinner plate. Hair, dry as brush bristles, was threaded into her scalp, and her cheeks and lips were rouged a faint pink. When she was tilted onto her back, her eyes stayed open instead of closing the way they should have, as though she was still watching Noah. There was a tear at the shoulder of her thin, brittle gown and tiny pinholes through the discolored fabric. It had not aged as well as the rest of the dollie-and the ride in Harper's backpack had not helped.

'Just listen,' Rallie said. 'Try not to be the huge jerk you have turned into.'

'I know you told us you weren't going to come over the other day, but I thought you might anyway,' Harper said, talking fast. 'And I could not just go in the cabinet and get the Princess if Mom were there.'

Rallie never said stuff like that, especially not to him. It stung.

So, I took the dollie out of the case that night when we had an argument and moved around some of Mom's other stuff to hide what I had done. But that night-well, I saw the dead girl.'

'You mean you had a nightmare,' Noah said.

'Just shut up a minute,' said Rallie.

It reminded Noah of the way Harper talked when she played villains or even the Princess herself. 'It was not like dreaming at all. She was sitting on the end of my bed. Her hair was blond, like dollies, but it was tangled and dirty. She was wearing a nightdress smeared with mud. She told me I had to bury her. She said she could not rest until her bones were in her own grave, and if I did not help her, she would make me sorry.' 'It wasn't like a regular dream,' Harper said, her fingers smoothing back the Princess's curls and her voice changing, going soft and chill as the night air.

Rallie shifted uncomfortably. Noah was silent for a long moment, arrested by the images Harper had conjured. He could almost see the girl in her stained nightgown.

Harper paused, as though she was expecting him to say something sarcastic.

'Her bones?' he finally echoed.

'Did you know that bone China has real bones in it?' Harper said, tapping a porcelain cheek. 'Her clay was made from human bones. Little-girl bones. That hair threaded through the scalp is the little girl's hair. And the body of the dollie is filled with her leftover ashes.'

What is the punch line? Did one of you rig a sheet outside to flutter from a tree or something?'

A shiver ran up his spine. He closed his eyes to keep from looking at the dollie in Harper's lap. 'Okay, this is your idea of a funny prank. I get it. You are mad at me for not playing the game anymore, so you made up this story to scare me.'

'I told you,' Rallie said to Harper, under her breath.

'No, idiot,' said Rallie. 'I told her that you wouldn't believe us and that you wouldn't want to help.'

'You did rig a sheet?' Noah frowned, looking out at the trees and the mounds of cans and metal.

He threw up his hands in confusion. 'Help with what? Help you bury a dollie? Why would you need to wake me up in the middle of the night to help you do that?'

Harper pulled the dollie to her chest, and one of the eyes closed and opened, as though it was winking at him. 'Skylar Stella is real. That is the dollie-girl's name. She told me about herself. Her father was worker for a China manufacturer, designing and decorating pottery, and when Skylar died, her dad went crazy. He could not bear to put her in the ground, so he took her body back to the kilns at his job, chopped her up, and cremated her. 'She told you that?' It was too easy to imagine the dollie moving on her own, fluttering her painted eyelids and turning toward him. Maybe opening her tiny rosebud of a mouth to scream. He ground up to her burnt bones and used them to make a batch of bone China, then poured it into a mold cast from one of Skylar's favorite dollies. So, her grave stayed empty.' Noah tried to swallow, although his throat suddenly felt very dry.

'She is not going to rest until we bury her. And she is not going to let us rest either. She promised to make us miserable unless we help her.' 'Each night she told me a little bit more of her story.' Illuminare by the flashlight, Harper's face had become strange.

And I am still not sure but show him the thing. It is convincing.' He looked at Rallie. 'And you believe it? You believe all of this?' 'I never believed in ghosts, so not at first,' Rallie said. 'No offense, Harper, but it is a crazy story.'

'Show me what?'

Harper pulled the dolly's head sharply up from the body. Noah gasped at the sudden violence of it, but all that it revealed was a string-and-rusty-metal-hook apparatus. With a twist, the Princess's head came entirely off, leaving the hook still attached to the neck, hanging from the cord. Harper slid her fingers into the body of the dollie, feeling around like she was trying to reach something.

Harper drew out an old burlap bag from the neck cavity. 'Here, take this and look inside.' 'What are you doing?' He stared at the disembodied head resting on Harper's knee. The eyes were closed now. The bag was full, but Noah could not tell what it was full of. He took the rough cloth as she turned the beam of the flashlight on it, revealing letters and dates in blocky print.

'Eaton?' he read aloud. He had a vague memory of the place from some late-night British rock documentary his mom had been watching. 'That is where the Beatles are from-in Eaton. There is no way we can go there. We are going to have to find out if ghost girls really can curse people, because-'

So, we could get on a bus and be there by morning.' She paused. 'And we are. We are going. Tonight. Well, technically, its morning, so we are going in the morning.' 'That's what I thought at first,' Rallie said and pointed to the markings. 'But look again. It says East Eaton. In Ohio.'

He looked from the dollie to Rallie and then to Harper. 'Therefore, you brought me out here?'

'We tried to explain yesterday,' Rallie said. 'I told you it was important.'

Harper reached down and turned the flashlight beam on her watch, then shone it at him. 'There is a bus stopping in town at two fifteen in the morning. It is coming from Philadelphia and going to Youngstown. One of the stops is East Eaton. Rallie said she had come if you would too.'

Was she trying to play a different kind of game? A game that she was making out of their real lives. But Harper did not look gleeful the way she did when she had a thrilling idea. She looked pale and nervous like she had not been sleeping well. Noah thought about the ghost story that Harper had told on

their last walk home, the one about holding your breath when you passed a cemetery.

Rallie shrugged.

'You'll go?' he asked finally, looking at Rallie. Her grandmother would not like a single thing about this: not the ghost, not the bus, not Rallie being out at two in the morning with a boy—even if the boy were just him.

Noah's parents would not like him going either, but that was a point in favor of the plan, as far as he was concerned. And if he decided that he never wanted to come back, well, at least he would have some company while he figured out where he was going. In real life, he was not sure there were any equivalent jobs. In stories, orphan boys became assistant pig keepers and magicians' apprentices.

'You still haven't looked in the bag,' Rallie said, pointing to the burlap sack he was holding. 'It's pretty weird.'

Harper handed Rallie the flashlight. She held it up high, pointing it down at him. With trepidation, he pulled the drawstrings so that he could peer inside.

Of course. The leftover ashes. The remains of a ghost. Of a girl. Of the Princess.

For a moment, Noah did not know what he was seeing. The bag was full of something that looked a little bit like dark sand with chunks of shells in it. Then he realized that the bag was full of gray ash, and what he had thought were shells were sharp, pale pieces of bone.

A nameless primal terror washed over him. He wanted to drop the bag, wanted to race out of the shed, and go back to bed where he could shiver under his covers. But he did not move. His hands started to shake, and he drew the strings tight, so he did not have to look anymore.

Despite her words, Rallie's voice grew a little uncertain. Noah wondered if she had balked at first before she had promised Harper that if he went, she would go too.

'Harper thinks we can catch a bus back in the afternoon and be home by dinnertime. It is only a three-hour ride, but there are not a lot of buses from here to there—just this one early in the morning, and another in the afternoon that gets in too late for us to ride back in time. We left a note for her parents.'

'If these bones are real,' he began, 'shouldn't we tell someone? A girl died. Skylar's father murdered her. It is a cold-case file.'

'No one's going to care about some old story,' Harper said. 'And even if they did, they'd just take the dollie away from us-put her in a museum or display her somewhere-and then her spirit would be angry.'

He paused, considering everything she had said and what she had not said. 'Did you find the ashes before or after you dreamed about Skylar Stella?'

'I'm going whether you both come or not,' Harper said, snatching the burlap bag out of his hand. He guessed that meant she had found the ashes first. 'Whether you believe me or not, I'm going to bury her as she wants.'

Getting on a bus in the middle of the night to a place they had never been daunting. It also seemed a little bit like an adventure.

'Okay,' he said. 'Fine. I will come.'

Rallie looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. He wondered for the first time if she had been planning on him saying no and had not considered the possibility that he would say yes. If so, she should have told him.

Okay? No more hassling me about it.'

'I'll come,' he continued, 'so long as you both promise not to ask me about the game or why I do not want to play. 'Okay,' said Harper.

'Okay,' said Noah.

'Okay,' said Rallie.

'You need to get ready fast,' Harper said. 'And leave a note so your parents do not freak out. Just tell them you got up early and that you will be back tonight.'

'Yes,' Harper said. 'I planned it all out. Just bring food and supplies, okay, Noah? We will meet at the mailbox in twenty minutes.'

'And you're sure the bus will get us back in time?' Rallie asked. 'You're positive?'

She switched off the flashlight and, for a moment, the shed was plunged into darkness.

By the time they did, Harper had put away the Princess, so at least her terrible head with its winking eye was hidden. Noah blinked, willing his eyes to adjust.

There was a quiet that hung over the world in the middle of the night, as though there was no one else awake anywhere. It felt ripe with magic and endless possibility. Noah walked home through the hushed streets; his sneakers were wet with dew from the frosted grass.

He did find a can of orange soda, a package of saltine crackers, three oranges, red Twizzlers, and a jar of peanut butter, all of which he stuffed into his backpack.

His mother did not have either of those things nor did she have eleven limbs, which had kept Joseph and Samantha from starving on the way to Mount Doom and always made him think of matzoth (which his mom also did not have).

He snuck back into his house and stood for a long moment in the dark kitchen, a feeling of great daring swelling his heart. When he finally went to the cabinets, he felt as though he was provisioning himself for one of those epic fantasy quests—the kind that required a lot of jerkies or something called hardtack that he had read about soldiers eating during the Civil War and which he thought might be a bread.

In his room, Noah changed into jeans, switched out his sweater for a zip-up sweatshirt, and packed a few other random things he thought he might need: twenty-three dollars (twenty of which had come from his aunt in a card for his birthday), a book identifying poisonous plants (in case they needed to live in the wild and eat berries, which admittedly seemed like a remote possibility), and a sleeping bag that was a little too small for him but worked okay as a blanket when completely unzipped. In the hall closet, he found a flashlight, and he picked up a garden spade from beside the back door.

Before he left, he wrote out the note and propped it up on his bed. It read:

Got up early. Gone to play basketball. Might not be back for dinner.

It might not be back forever, he thought, but did not write.

As he left the house, closing the door quietly behind him, he wondered, for a moment, again, if this was a trick. A lie. Harper's attempt at one last game.

Nonetheless, the ashes had seemed real, he reminded himself.

In the end, he was not sure if he went because he half believed in the ghost already or because he was used to following Harper's lead in a story, or simply because leaving allowed him to run away and still believe he could come back.

If he wanted.

CHAPTER SIX

Noah's mother's parents, now living permanently in Florida, would tell stories about how things used to be. About how the big Victorian houses—the ones built by some famous architect, the ones that were in the center of town used to be owned by single families and not divided into run-down apartments.

NOAH WAS USED TO STORIES WITHOUT HAPPY Endings. His dad called where they lived West of

Nowhere, Pennsylvania, claiming it bordered Better Off Forgotten, West Virginia, and Already Forgotten, Ohio. When Noah was little, those had seemed like magical place names before he realized they were just sarcasm. Noah's mother had gone to school to be an art therapist, but the only place she could get work was in a juvenile detention center. If she wanted the kids there to do art, she had to bring the supplies and collect them after each session because her supervisor was afraid of the kids jabbing each other's eyes out with markers.

His grandmother told stories about the people she had known when she was a little girl, people who got out of town and made it elsewhere. The happiest the stories got was when his parents talked about how things were going to get better, although neither one of them really seemed to believe it, and Noah did not believe it anymore either.

That was all. It was as if the town had a gravitational influence on the people who lived there. But even as Noah thought that he knew it was just another story. Dad was back because he had not been able to hack it in the city.

When Noah's dad left three years ago, he said he was going to run his restaurant in Philadelphia, and he was going to Italy to study how pasta was made and he was getting a late-night spot on a local cable channel and would parlay that into a fortune. But two months later, he moved back into one of the crappy apartments in the biggest and worst-kept Victorian and drifted in and out of Noah's life, until he finally drifted back to their house.

He wondered whether growing up was learning that most stories turned out to be lies.

Rallie was in a big shapeless red coat. Both had backpacks slung over their shoulders. The bus stop was cold enough that Noah's breath clouded in the air. The wind had picked up. It washed over them as they huddled together against the brick exterior of the post office. In the flickering streetlight, Noah could see the girls better. Harper had pulled back her coppery hair into a ponytail and was wearing a dark-green sweater with jeans and tall brown boots.

He felt his gaze going to Harper's backpack, knowing the Princess was inside and knowing, without knowing how he knew, that her eyes were open. He felt the weight of her stare on his back when he turned away. The hairs on the back of his neck stuck up, tickling his skin, and making him shiver.

A while back they had seen a police car from a way off and had pressed themselves against the wall of the building. As they hid, Harper muttered the whole time about the vividness of Rallie's coat giving them away and Rallie muttered back about how she had just packed for a sleepover because she had not thought they were taking off somewhere harebrained that very night. But the police car had turned onto Main Street and gone away from them. And the next car that passed was a truck. It did not even slow.

The bus was already fifteen minutes late, and there was no sign of it or any other vehicle on the road.

Rallie yawned. 'We should go back. It does not look like the bus is coming.'

Noah, impelled by the impulse that makes yawns catch, yawned too.

'Stop,' Harper said. 'We just have to wait a little longer.'

'You can't be mad at us for being tired,' Noah said.

Harper was still upset, but she did not argue with him. 'We'll sleep on the bus.'

Rallie bit her lip and looked hopefully at the stretch of empty road. She looked happier the longer they waited. Noah was sure she was betting on the bus not coming and the three of them going back to their beds, having had a nice little middle-of-the-night adventure. He could tell Rallie did not want to be the one who chickened out, but she also did not want to go. If Rallie's grandmother found out about any of this, there would be no more play practice,

no more sleepovers, and no more chance of hanging out with Noah or Harper. Ever.

Noah understood all that and he felt bad for her, but not bad enough to say anything. Selfishly, he wanted her alone.

'Two more minutes,' said Rallie, 'and then we went back. I am freezing.'

Harper did not reply.

Looking at the bus stop sign, Noah thought about what it would be like to get off at a place like this in a different town, one he had no idea how to navigate. 'When we get to East Eaton, you know where we are supposed to go, right? What cemetery Skylar is supposed to be buried in and how to find the grave. You know all that, right?'

'One minute, fifty-nine seconds,' Rallie said. 'One minute, fifty-eight seconds.'

Harper opened her mouth and hesitated over the answer. Just then a bus turned the corner three blocks away, washing them with its headlights. He did not realize how worried Harper had been that it was not coming until he saw how relieved she looked like the bus drew closer. Rallie's face froze in an expression of dread.

'No,' she said, looking back down the street, away from the bus, and sighing. 'It is not that. I am only tired. Anyway, if I snuck back into my house when I am supposed to be sleeping at Harper's, Grandma would have a lot of questions.'

'You don't have to go,' he whispered to her, deciding he could be only so much of a jerk.

Somehow the parents who were giving them a ride did not come on time, or it took too long to drop everybody off, but Rallie wound up home a half-hour late. That was all it took. Boom. She was in mega-trouble. No phone calls. No Internet. No nothing.

The last time Rallie had gotten busted for staying out after curfew, she would get grounded for a solid month. She had been to the movie version of one of her favorite musicals, along with some of her theater the door opened with a creak of gear. An old man with a short white beard looked down at them. A small gold hoop hung from one of his ears, and he had a face that reminded

Noah of a gruff and unfriendly wizard. 'Well, get on if you're getting on.' friends and Harper.

So even though he knew that she was not telling the whole truth about wanting to go, given that she was likely to get in trouble, either way, he figured she might as well have an adventure and hope for the best.

Harper, Noah, and Rallie climbed the steps, each feeding cash into a machine beside the driver. It printed three tickets and dispensed change into a bowl with a clatter. Noah shuffled down the aisle, past a knitting woman and three college-age guys asleep in their seats, past a guy muttering to himself and looking out the window.

Noah went all the way to the back of the bus, following Harper. They sat in the last long seat. A moment later Rallie joined them, squeezing in next to the window.

Noah looked at Harper's backpack resting on the floor and wondered whether Harper had reattached the Princess's head or whether it would roll around in the bottom of her bag when the bus turned corners. He thought he could see a few threads of her blond hair peeking out from where the zipper was not fully closed.

'See,' Harper said, pulling her legs up so that she was sitting on her feet in a weird yoga pose. 'Everything's going according to plan.'

'I can't believe the bus came,' Rallie said faintly.

The bus lurched forward, pulling away from the bus stop, and despite everything, Noah started to grin.

'You never really answered me before,' Noah said. 'Do you know where the cemetery is? Do you know where we are going, Harper?'

They were left home by themselves-going on a real adventure, the kind that changed you. He felt a thrill run through him.

'The grave is under a willow tree. Skylar will tell us the rest.'

'Skylar will tell us?' he asked in a quiet, urgent voice.

'She told me this much, didn't she?' Harper answered, and then in that way she had, where Noah was sure she wasn't right yet somehow, she seemed right, she added neatly and unanswerable, 'If you didn't believe me, why did you come?'

Rallie leaned against the window and pulled her legs up onto the seat, resting one shoe against Noah's leg. She looked exhausted, but no longer unhappy. 'I'm going to try to sleep.' Exasperated, he mimed banging his head against the back of the seat. Harper ignored him.

He rested a hand on her ankle so it would not slip.

'We should take shifts,' Harper said. 'Keep watch. Like you are supposed to on a quest. So, we do not miss our stop.'

'Okay,' Noah said, sticking out a fisted hand. 'Rock, paper, scissors.'

She still beat him, throwing a rock at his scissors. He stuck with scissors and tricked Harper, who threw paper, expecting him to change moves. And then Rallie beat Harper, sticking Harper with the first watch, Noah with a second, and Rallie, with the third. Noah rested his head against his backpack and closed his eyes.

Rallie held out her hand and blinked muzzily like she was trying to stay awake.

He did not think he would be able to go to sleep, but he must have dozed off because it seemed like moments later, he awoke to Harper's sharp yelp.

He sat up. The old guy who had been talking to himself had moved to the seat in front of them. He was leaning close to Harper and just letting go of a strand of her hair.

'I was just kidding you. Come on, you are a cute little thing. Are you used to being teased?' His bad breath washed over Noah, bringing with it a molding smell, like wet clothes left in the washing machine overnight and sneakers after a long game. His hair was wild tangled curls, shot through with gray, and he had a scraggly beard hiding half of his windblown face. Nicotine stains darkened the ends of his pale fingers. 'That your brother? Don't he tease you?'

'Yes, he's my brother,' Harper lied quickly. 'And he doesn't like it if I talk to strangers.'

He sounded like he was teasing all right but in a bad way. A scary way. 'That bus driver-you cannot trust him. He is senile as a moose. And sometimes he gets aliens in him.'

He cackled, revealing a black gap where a few bottom teeth should have been. He turned his attention to Noah. 'I was just telling your smart-mouthed little sister here that you can't be sure this bus is going to take you where you want to go.'

Rallie shifted and opened her eyes, blinking away dreams. When she saw the old guy, her eyes went wide, and she grabbed her bag. 'What's going on?'

His father would say that as the boy, it was his responsibility to protect the girls. That made him even more scared because he was afraid, he had let them down. 'Thanks for the advice.'

'Okay,' Noah told the man, leaning forward, trying to get between him and Harper.

The old guy's grin widened. 'Oh, the little man is going to give Kanth Jones the brush-off. Do you want to fight? Do you want to show off for the girls? And who is that one over there? She is no sister of yours. Just what is it that you three are doing, anyway? Running off from home?' Rallie leaned forward. 'We're not doing anything.'

'Look, we appreciate you coming over and talking with us,' Harper said placatingly. 'But if that's all—'

'Crazy as anything. Sometimes he gets a little lost. Sometimes he just parks and gets out of the bus, wanders around for a while. And sometimes he has meetings with those things. In their shiny spaceship. You can see the lights. Just leave us out here for as long as it takes him to communicate.'

'Senile as all get out.' Kanth tapped his head and made a swirly motion with his finger, returning to his favorite subject—the bus driver.

Rallie elbowed Noah and raised her eyebrows, eyes wide.

'Okay,' Harper said. 'We will watch out for that.'

'You've got really pretty hair too,' Kanth Jones said, turning to Rallie with a sly grin. His fingers darted out to tug at one of her braids. 'Like little ropes.'

Rallie jerked back.

'Don't touch her,' Noah said.

'Oh, possessive, huh? Well then, what if I talk to your sister and leave the two of you alone?' Kanth grabbed Harper's arm. She pushed herself back against the cushion and out of the range of his hand before he could touch her.

'Well, I am not going to talk to the blond-haired person, so you better forget that idea. I do not like the way she looks at me. She is going to tell you that she has never hurt anybody, but do not listen. She had hurt you, all right? She had hurt you and she would like it.' The man laughed. 'You all are jumpy; you know that? Real paranoid.'

'Hey!' Noah said.

None of them were blond. As far as Noah could tell, no one on the bus was blond. He wondered what it was like to be so crazy that you saw things that were not there. He wondered if when you hallucinated, the stuff you were imagining was just as clear as the regular stuff, or if it were hazy at the edges so that if you concentrated, you could tell.

'It's time for you to sit somewhere else,' Rallie told him, drawing herself up impressively as she did on stage at the school play. 'I might not look like it, but I am their sister. I am adopted. And I do not want you to talk to my brother like that anymore.'

'Aw, C'mon,' he said, reaching into his front breast pocket and coming out with a small paper bag-wrapped bottle. 'I have a black belt. You will need me when the aliens come.'

'You wait and see. Those drivers are going to roll on out of this bus and leave all of us alone, and when he comes back, he is going to have a new face. The aliens ride around in his skin. So, when he does that, who are you going to tell?'

The bus turned a corner and started to slow down. There was a brightly lit bus station up the road. Noah feels relieved.

The rest of the bus was quiet and dark, the only lights in two strips down the center aisle and near the front, where the knitting Girl sat. It seemed like a vast distance. There was only the click of her needles and the sound of the man's voice.

In just a couple of minutes, they would be able to get off the bus, but what then? It was too soon for this to be East Eaton. This was just a random stop in a random town they did not know.

'You be careful,' Kanth Jones said, looking right at Noah. 'You better not let them get taken. That is your job as a brother. You the man in the family, and you got to fight to make sure the aliens do not steal their faces. Aliens like red hair. They take you down in the diamond ghost caves and you never come out again.'

'But aliens don't live underground,' Rallie said, completely incapable of not pointing out when something did not make sense. 'They live in the sky. In spaceships.'

The bus stopped, its engine grinding. The door opened and the overhead lights came on, making Kanth's skin look sallow. He took a swig from the paper-bag-covered bottle. Then he stood up.

Noah widened his eyes, trying to signal her not to say anything that would agitate Kanth Jones.

They looked at one another.

'Shows what you know. No, the safest thing is for you all to stay right here on the bus.'

'I've got to use the bathroom,' Noah said.

'What if we need to protect him?' Rallie asked, standing up.

'Then you go,' Kanth Jones said. 'I'll protect these ladies and make sure you got the same face you left with.'

Kanth Jones shook his head. 'You can't go where he's going.'

And if he took this route, he must have harassed passengers before. The bus driver would come back, say a few things, and Kanth Jones would go back to his seat. Everything would work out.

For a horrible moment, Noah worried that Kanth Jones was going to block the aisle and make it impossible for them to exit. But then the bus driver stood up and turned his head toward them. Noah feels relieved.

If Kanth Jones knew the driver well enough to complain about him constantly stopping for aliens, he must take this route a lot.

But the driver just took a long look at Noah, Harper, and Rallie and got off the bus. He did not say or do a single thing to help them.

Kanth Jones wore a smirk on his face as he had known all along, he was not going to get in trouble.

Kanth Jones grabbed for Rallie, and she gave a single, blood-curdling shriek, loud enough for the frat boys to wake up and the knitting Girl to turn around in her seat. Loud enough for Kanth to let Rallie go in surprise.

Harper shoved past him with a suddenness that got her through before he could react. While Kanth Jones gaped at her, Noah charged down the aisle, catching Rallie's hand and pulling her with him.

'Don't come crying to me when the aliens take your faces!' he yelled after them.

There were benches and vending machines and bright fluorescent lights. Rallie collapsed onto a bench, her eyes a little wet. She looked as freaked out as Noah felt.

The bus driver was smoking a cigarette, talking to two station employees, when they charged past him and into the building.

'This was your plan,' Noah said, and then regretted it. He knew he was not being fair, but he was tired and upset and had no idea what to do himself. He felt useless. Noah took Harper's arm. 'Right now. Come. Go.'

'What are we going to do?' Harper asked, pacing back and forth, backpacking over one shoulder.

'We can't get back on that bus,' said Rallie.

'We could tell someone-like a police officer. There must be a police officer around a late-night bus station, right?'

Noah looked over at the bus driver. One station team member was speaking into a walkie-talkie. The other was watching the three of them.

'Yes, and they'll ask us how old we are.' Rallie shook her head. 'And call our families. No.'

'We have to get out of here,' Noah said.

'Why?' asked Rallie. Then she noticed the three men standing together and got up quickly, swinging her bag onto her shoulder.

'But we didn't do anything,' Harper said, walking along with him. 'Why would they be after us? Why not do something about that guy? He is the one-'

'Because we're kids,' Noah whispered, cutting her off.

'We're being too obvious,' Rallie said under her breath. 'Harper, we should go into the girls' room and sneak out from there. Noah, meet us outside. Get something from the vending machine.'

Everyone, go slow.'

Noah took a deep breath and then spoke loudly and as casually as he could, 'I'll meet you guys back on the bus.'

Rallie smiled and nodded exaggeratedly, playing casual too now. Harper tried to follow her lead.

One of the bus station employees had peeled away from the others and was heading in Noah's direction, his shoe fell echoing in the most space. He was not rushing, but he had too much purpose in the way he moved to be just strolling. Noah started toward the door, deliberately not running despite wanting to. He paused a minute to look at the vending machine. In its reflection, he saw the station guy drawing closer, his Jon uniform making him seem ominously authoritative.

Noah moved toward the door.

'Hey, you, there,' the station guy called to him.

But Noah was out through the doors and turning a corner of the building and saw Rallie lowering herself from the girls' bathroom window. Harper jumped out after her and they were off and running into the darkness of an unknown town.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Where are we?' Rallie asked finally, her breath clouding in the air.

All the adrenaline Noah had felt back in the station burned him off, and he felt tired down to the marrow of his bones. Eye-droopingly exhausted. He leaned against the brick wall and wondered if it was possible to fall asleep standing up.

'And how are you going to get out of here?' asked Noah, pushing bizarrely. 'We don't even know what town we're in.'

THEY HUDDLED IN THE DARK BEHIND A TATTOO PARLOR and watched as the bus pulled out of the station in a cloud of exhaust, taking with it both the crazy guy and their chances of getting to East Eaton by morning.

Harper followed. 'There are only two buses to East Eaton that take this route, and if we wait to take the next one-in the afternoon-then we won't have enough time to take the bus back by tonight.'

'Forget East Eaton. We must get home,' Rallie said, digging out the cell phone that she was only allowed to use for emergencies.

'Sure,' Noah said. 'But we cannot do that, either can we?'

Rallie took the bus schedule and opened it, studying the names of stations as though she were going to be able to figure out where they were just by finding a name that struck her as feeling like the right one.

'Hold on,' Noah said, walking the other way down the alley so that he could see the front of the bus station. He walked back again. 'East Rochester. There is a sign that says so-but where is that?'

Harper pulled the bus schedule from one of her pockets, along with a raggedy map. 'You can look at this stuff if you want, but it's not going to tell you anything I haven't already told you.'

Harper crowded next to Rallie, so they were squinting together at the schedule in the dim moonlight. 'There were only two more stops before East Eaton,' Harper said finally. 'We almost made it.'

'We're not even out of Pennsylvania yet,' said Rallie. 'We didn't almost make anything.'

Rallie pulled her coat more tightly around her, sitting down on the back steps of a building. Dumpsters loomed to one side of her. 'Can you call Tom and see if he'll pick us up?' Her voice sounded on the verge of panic. Calm, but not likely to stay that way.

Harper unfolded the map and tapped it grandly. 'Look, that says Ohio.' Then she shook her head. 'Oh, it says Ohio River.'

Harper just looked at her. 'My brother will never come all the way here. Not in that junked car of his.'

Harper shook her head. 'She broke her phone and has not gotten a new one yet. I could not get ahold of her if I wanted to.'

'Your sister, then?' Rallie asked, chewing on the end of one of her braids.

Rallie looked at the face of her phone, frowning. 'I guess I could call my aunt Linda. She would be mad, but she had come.'

'Would she tell your grandmother?' Noah asked.

Noah tried to imagine a single thing they could tell Rallie's grandmother to try and make sense of what they had done. She would not want to hear about a creepy, still-headless dollie, a ghost, and a curse that, more likely than not, did not even exist.

Rallie sighed heavily, a little shudder going across her shoulders. 'Probably. And then I will get grounded forever and must quit the play and be miserable. But what else are we going to do?'

'I won't go back,' Harper said, sitting on the steps next to Rallie. 'I'm going to wait for the next bus and keep going.'

'But you said that the next bus wasn't coming until the afternoon, so you won't make it home before Sunday,' Rallie said. 'Where would you sleep?'

Harper took a deep but unsteady breath. Noah could see that the idea of Rallie leaving her made Harper feel a lot less daring. He did not want Rallie to go either; she was good at making crazy ideas work. If Rallie is right. We can bury the Princess next weekend or the weekend after that,' Noah said. 'What's the difference?'

Harper produced the idea that they needed an ancient temple under the waves, Rallie was the one who would find the discarded chunks of concrete to build it. Her going home would signal that they were doing something dumb.

You guys will make excuses and I will chicken out and Skylar will find someone else to haunt because I will not be interesting enough to have a ghost talk to me. I do not deserve to be the hero of a story, and I will not be one.'

Harper's shoulders hunched forward as she got tenser. 'If we do not keep going now, we will never do it. We just will not.'

'Everyone has a story,' Rallie murmured. 'Everyone is the hero of their story. That is what Ms. Evans said in English.'

'No,' Harper said, her deep voice very fierce. 'There are people who do things and people who never do-who say they will someday, but they just do

not. I want to go on a quest. I have always wanted to go on a quest. And now that I have one, I am not backing down from it. I am not going home until it is complete.'

And he decided that even if it was dumb, he wanted to be the kind of person who was interesting enough to have a ghost talk to him. Even if the idea of the Princess being made of bones and filled with human ash grew more frightening the farther, they got from home. Noah thought she might be right. He thought of his dad, who wanted to do things and then did not.

Rallie laughed a little, uncomfortably, like what Harper said about being a hero had hit a little close to home for her, too.

Leaving in the middle of the night and escaping from the bus station already seemed like the kinds of things that happened on quests, so from that perspective, they were doing well. And thinking that made his tired brain slip into playing mode, which led to thinking like Tommesings.

'What if we don't go back right away?' he asked suddenly. 'If we do not call anyone, we do not get in trouble, right? No one will know what happened. So, if you take the bus back tonight-not the one to East Eaton, the one back home-then your grandmother will never know anything. Or we could even make it to East Eaton and take the bus back from there. There must be a way for us to get there-we could walk if we must. It cannot be that many miles up the river. And the quest would be completed, despite some slight setbacks.'

'In the dark?' Rallie asked.

'We might as well try,' Harper said, brightening. 'And you do not want to get in trouble, right?'

'I'm tired and it's the middle of the night,' said Rallie. 'I don't feel like trying to follow some stupid map with a dying flashlight and the compass on my phone.'

The North Star was the brightest of the Little Dipper stars and the one at the very end of the Little Dipper's handle. Noah thought about Tommy singing the Blade, steering his ship by the North Star, and blinking up into the night sky. You were supposed to be able to find it by looking for the Big Dipper and then using that to find the Little Dipper.

That is Polaris, he thought. If we can see that, we cannot get lost.

'We'll find our way.' When he spoke, he could feel Tommesings's voice creeping into his voice, which was strange because Tommesings was gone. 'And figure out a place to camp.'

'Make camp?' Harper asked.

Heck, he liked trouble. 'We will eat the provisions we brought. Look, even according to the tiny map on the bus schedule, if we just follow the river, it should take us to East Eaton. Our quest could still be completed.' 'Until the break of day.' It was exhaustion, but it was not that hard to think of what Tommesings would say. Tommy sings always got into scrapes, so they did not bother him.

'You want us to walk?' Rallie said. 'Both of you have gone crazy.'

'My Girl, I want us to rest,' Noah replied, offering her his arm. For once, he did not feel uncertain. 'I want us to take our meager supplies and turn them into a feast. She laughed tiredly and looped her arm with his. 'Fine. But I am going to want to go home upon the morrow, so plan on that happening.'

I want us to make a fire and warm our bones. Then, in the morning, we can decide what to do from there. Should you, fair house cleaner, wish to return home upon the morrow, then we shall entertain your arguments.'

'See, you missed the game.' Harper's mouth lifted in a triumphant smile. 'You missed us playing. Admit it.'

Harper took a step back. Noah stopped abruptly, whirling on her, the spell broken. 'I told you not to talk about that, and you said you wouldn't.' His voice came out harsher than he had intended, a growl.

'Okay,' Rallie said, grabbing his shoulder and propelling him down the alley. 'So long as we are not freezing, I will not call home. If we can camp, get warm, and sleep for a while, then let us do that and try not to get in more trouble than we are already in.'

'Girl Jann would be good at surviving on the streets,' Harper said innocently.

Noah glared.

'What? I was talking to Rallie, not you. I am allowed to talk to Rallie about the game, aren't I? You did not make any rules about that.'

'We should keep off big roads,' Noah warned, pointing toward a narrow street up ahead. 'If someone sees us with the map and the flashlight, they are going to guess we are lost kids or runaways or something. We already had those people at the bus station after us.'

Rallie sighed. 'I do not even know what you two are fighting about. You both want to stay on this crazy adventure, and that is what we are doing.'

'We still don't know if they were chasing us,' Harper said. 'They wanted to apologize about the crazy guy. They were afraid we were going to miss the bus. Or they were aliens trying to take our faces.'

Noah raised his eyebrows and started walking.

'Oh fine, yes, let us use the dark scary road,' Rallie said, but she followed him anyway. 'Let me see the map.'

Harper handed it over along with the flashlight. There was a strange quiet in the air, as though everyone and everything was asleep. The echo of their footsteps was the loudest sound for several blocks. It felt both eerie and exciting to Noah. It seemed to him that the entire world had become theirs for a little while.

The asphalt of the alley was cracked, and they had to be careful not to stumble as they headed down it, passing heaped mounds of garbage and the back doors of restaurants.

'There's a stretch of woods,' Rallie said, waving the map. 'Close to the water. We would have to cross the highway to get there, but we are not too far.'

'Is it a lot of wood?'

'Not really. But it is a park. Like a small, protected-area park looking out on the water, not a kid park with swings. Too small for a fire to be hidden, but big enough that we are not going to be seen from the road.'

Noah nodded and let her direct them. He did not know how to make a fire anyway. It had just seemed like something that you did when you made camp, along with making stews and playing lutes and swigging from jugs of cider.

They passed a supermarket with trucks pulled up to the back-unloading flats of cardboard boxes. They passed a donut shop, closed, but with a light on

inside. It gave off a warm waft of fresh dough and melting sugar. Noah's stomach growled, and he fished a Twizzles out of the pack. In comparison to the delicious smell, the candy tasted like sweet rubber.

'This was such a terrible idea,' Rallie muttered as they walked. 'How did you convince me this was a clever idea?' This was a terrible, terrible, terrible idea.'

He dug around and took out enough to give Rallie and Harper a couple of Twizzlers each, in case they were hungry too.

'Thank you, kind sir,' said Harper, with a little bow.

Harper looked crestfallen, which was stupid because she had been needling him a minute ago about playing. He did not know why she was upset over something she started. If she had not pointed out that he was playing, he would not have had to stop.

'I am not doing that with you,' Noah said, biting the Twizzles savagely.

'Will you two quit it?' Rallie said, aiming the beam of the flashlight at the sidewalk. She had the red candy hanging out of one side of her mouth and was chomping on it like it was a cartoon cigar.

Noah started to say something about how it was her fault that they were tired when he realized saying that might prove her point that he was cranky.

Harper looked at her feet. 'We're cranky because we're tired, that's all.'

The highway was a long stretch of lanes, with an even wider overpass, but at half-past four in the morning, they saw only a single truck, headlights lighting up the street so brightly that it almost seemed like a day.

Once it zoomed by, Polly and Rallie held hands and raced for the median. They climbed the concrete block quickly; Noah's long legs made it easy for him to hop over. Then they ran across the lanes on the other side, even though no cars were coming from either direction.

They could still see the lights of East Rochester on one side and could just glimpse the glimmering, rippling surface of the Ohio River stretching out on the other. But after a few minutes of walking, Noah felt hidden from the road. The edge of the woods was scrubby and sloped down at a steep angle. They

tripped over sticks and uneven patches of earth. Long roping tendrils of bushes scraped at their legs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'Well, THIS IS IT,' RALLIE SAID, SHADING THE Flashlight with her hand. 'You think we can sleep out here?'

Noah knelt. The ground was wet-the wet that seeps up and soaks through clothes. He leaned against a tree, and despair washed over him. He liked the idea of an adventure-but what did he know about having one? He was not used to roughing it. He was not used to bugs and dirt and all the stuff soldiers and pirates had to deal with. The only time he had done anything even like camping was when he set up his grandfather's old tent in his backyard; it had turned out to be full of spiders, and he had ripped open the old canvas trying to escape from them.

Even though they were close to the highway, the branches swinging overhead and the smell of leaf mold rising from the forest floor made Noah feel a million miles away from the world he knew. Like they were in some fantasy land where dragons flew overhead, and magic was possible.

Harper sat down on the root of a tree. 'Ugh, it is damp and cold on my butt-u-lar region. We are going to need a hammock or something.'

Pushing away from the tree, he unzipped his backpack and pulled out his sleeping bag. It was waterproof on one side, so if he opened it fully and spread it out like a picnic blanket, it would be big enough for all of them to sit on. Maybe keep them dry.

'That was smart, bringing that,' Rallie said, helping him to spread it out. 'All I have is a change of clothes, toothpaste, and cookies that we got from Harper's.'

'You couldn't sneak back into your house,' Harper reminded her, crawling onto the sleeping bag, flopping down, and rooting around in her pack. 'And I didn't exactly give you advance notice.'

The lolling head and closed eyes combined to make the Princess look as tired as they were, which was oddly reassuring. Harper set the dollie down and smoothed out her dress, then turned back to the bag. She tugged out a thin-looking coverlet, some safety pins, and Band-Aids, a bar of chocolate that had

gotten slightly mashed, a package of baby carrots, a bruised apple, a sweater, a pair of socks, a notebook, and one of her mermaid dolls.

Which, from Harper, was an apology.

She took the Princess out of her bag. The dolly's eyes were open, but as Harper leaned her one way and then another, her eyes closed. Noah was glad to see that Harper had reattached the Princess's head, although it lolled slightly like Harper had done it in a hurry and it was not exactly right.

'This is what I bought,' she said. 'To share if you want any.'

'We should take turns keeping watch,' Noah said, 'as we did on the bus.' He took out his jar of peanut butter, a package of crackers, oranges, and orange soda and put everything but the soda with the other supplies. Thirsty, he popped the tab on the drink. Fizzy foam bubbled up, and he quickly shifted the can over a mound of grass so the spraying liquid could spill onto the dirt. Then he took a long swig.

He thought about how he had met them both when they were all little kids. Harper had been riding her bike up and down the block when she saw Noah sitting on his front steps, reading a beat-up old copy of James and the Giant Peach. She stopped to tell him that she had read the book and it was good, but not as good as The Witches, and had he read The Twits? She was the one who had met Rallie, too, picking her up at a carnival, where they had been the only two girls who had their faces painted like Batgirl instead of fairies, cats, and clowns. The first time the three of them had spent time together, they had dangled upside down from the jungle gym until the blood rushed to their heads, trying to get their brains to work. Bettley would that they would be able to move things with the combined power of their minds.

The bubbles hit the back of his throat satisfyingly in a satisfying way.

It seemed like such a long time ago.

'Watch? For what?' Rallie said, reaching out her hand for the soda. 'It is not like there are going to be marauding orcs or bears or wolves or creepy, crazy old bus riders. We are in a tiny strip of park.'

'We'll sleep better if someone's on watch,' said Noah, glancing at the dolly's creepy, almost sleeping face. He wanted someone to make sure she did not wake up and move around while their eyes were closed. 'Or I will, anyway.'

'Not me,' said Rallie, yawning.

'I'll go second,' Noah said. 'Kick me if you get tired sooner.'

'I can stay up,' Harper said. 'How about I wake one of you in an hour?'

She nodded. He finished off his orange soda in another two gulps. Rallie had her enormous red coat off and was quickly layering her change of clothes to jeans and a Jon hoodie with cat ears on the hood-on along with the gray dress she was wearing. Then she curled up like a bug under her coat, closed her eyes, and seemed to fall instantly into slumber.

Harper had her thin blanket wrapped around her like a cape and was sitting with her back against the trunk of the tree, looking out at the water. Noah's eyes had adjusted enough to the moonlight that he could see the determined set of her jaw.

Harper's hand rested absently on the thing's chest like she was holding it still. As Noah looked, his imagination fed him a horrible image: The Princess staggering across the uneven ground toward him, her chubby arms reaching for him. He wondered if he could convince Harper to put the Princess back in her bag. On her lap was the Princess, eyes open now as though she was on watch with Harper, staring at nothing, the bone-white of the dolly's face seeming to glow in the gloom.

Harper tilted her head, her gaze going to where he was sitting. 'What?' she whispered.

He pointed to the dollie—that was once AVAs passed down, now with part of the soul of Nevaeh inside, and inside the mind were the minds of the mother and the 4 girls that had her stolen, realizing he had been staring. He kept his voice low. 'This whole thing. Is it a game? Just tell me.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'It's real, Noah.'

'Okay,' he said, too tired to fight, lying down on the open sleeping bag and pillowing his head on one arm. 'Wake me when it's my turn to be on the watch.'

HE DREAMED ABOUT a big building near a river billowing smoke from its towers. And then, his dream vision swooping forward, he saw a yellow-haired girl watching as her father spun beautiful things from bone china. Teapots were so thin and white that they seemed to glow from inside, covered in paper-fine China roses, lilies, and leaves. Vases were so fine that it seemed like a breath would shatter them, painted with lots of real gold.

She grunted a yes. He closed his eyes.

Skylar.

At the thought of her name, she turned toward him, her large black eyes widening like she was the one who saw a ghost.

His vision seemed smeared, and he was in front of a big, drafty house, welcoming a skinny and pinch-nosed woman. He knew, without knowing how, that he was looking at Skylar's aunt and that she had come down from the city to take care of Skylar after Skylar's mother had died six months past and it became clear that her father had no plans to remarry.

Children break things, her aunt said, and took away the dollies her father had made for her with spare clay, telling her they were too precious for her to keep.

Children are dirty, her aunt said, and forbade her from playing outside. She gave her chores instead, making her wash the windows, sweep the floors, and move the furniture around.

Noah watched as Skylar swept the floors, polished the blue, and hid things under her bed. Clothespins that she marked with ink, so they had eyes. A pillowcase was tied with string, so it seemed like it had a neck and head. In the dark of her room at night, when her father and her aunt had gone to their beds, she took them out and played with them, whispering to herself, calling them by the same names as her old dollies.

The aunt displayed them, along with less successful bone China pieces Skylar's father brought home from the factory. There was the bone China coffeepot wound with a vine that did not curve quite right, resting on the sideboard in the dining room. There were sets of too-small teacups and a bowl with alligator feet that were too frightening, and no one liked them. There were countless vases marred by mistakes, that listed a little to one side or had gold paint that had smeared or blistered before they were fired or had three-dimensional flowers that had broken coming out of the kiln. Soon several mistakes rested on every side table, forcing Skylar to tiptoe through the parlor to avoid breaking any.

NOAH WOKE, BLINKING, to Jon's sky overhead, dotted with puffs of clouds.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy of green and brown leaves, dappling the ground with bright spots and shadows. He heard a sound that reminded him of the ocean. He had gone to stay with his grandparents one summer after his dad left, and they had stayed in a house by the beach. He had woken up with the crash of the waves in his head every morning.

But this was not the ocean, he knew, and a moment later he realized it was not the Ohio River, either. It was the sound of the highway, of cars and trucks, whooshing past the woods, that sounded like breaking surf.

Noah sat up, blinking, stretching out his stiff limbs, and looking around him. Rallie was asleep on the sleeping bag, wrapped in her coat, braids falling in her face, a few pieces of white fuzz or feathers dusting her skin. Harper was asleep too, her head lolling back against the tree. She had fallen asleep on the watch, Noah realized.

Now that it was daytime, he could see that the glass orbs were slightly too small for her eye sockets, leaving gaps in the corners. An ant crawled out from one of them, marching across her eye and up over her forehead into the thicket of her hair. Noah sprang up and scuttled away from her, his heart racing.

Turning, he saw the Princess resting in the dirt right behind his head, far from where she had been the night before. Her black eyes were wide open, leering down at him.

There was more of the white stuff settling on the grass. It looked like snow, but then he realized what he was looking at. It was the inside of the sleeping bag. Something had ripped it, cutting the fabric, pulling out the lining, and scattered that, along with all their food.

Crackers were crumbling on the ground, and the chocolate bar was torn in half, pieces of gold foil scattered like confetti. He wondered who had done this and then looked over at the dolly's empty eyes, the ant on her bone-white cheek.

Baby carrots were tossed around in the dirt. The peanut butter was smeared on the bark of a nearby tree, the jar resting against a rock as if it had rolled there.

As he stared a squirrel ran up to the open jar of peanut butter and stuck its furry body inside.

It did not seem possible that they had spent the night in a tiny stretch of woods in a town he did not know. Looking back at the night before, at Harper and Rallie waking him up in the middle of the night, the story about the Princess, the walk to the bus station, and making camp in the dark—all those things felt distant like they had happened to someone in a book.

Turning back to where the dollie rested, outside the circle of Harper's arms, he wondered about other impossible things. Had a ghost trashed their campsite? Was Skylar watching him out of the Princess's glass eyes? A chill shivered up his spine.

Out in the middle of nowhere with an angry ghost and no idea how to get to her grave.

Oh yes, they were in trouble.

CHAPTER NINE

'Five more minutes,' she mumbled.

'Stranded in East Rochester, Pennsylvania,' Noah said with a shrug, hoping that gesture would somehow convey that he shared her feeling that everything had gotten weird.

'Rallie,' he said quietly, poking her upper arm. 'Something happened. Come on. Get up. You must see this.'

NOAH WOKE RALLIE BY SHAKING HER SHOULDER UNTIL she groaned and rolled over. Her braids spread out on the slashed sleeping bag and more white stuffing got caught in her hair.

She opened her eyes and seemed surprised to see him there.
'Where...?' 'Whom...?'

Then, as she took in the state of their campsite, she turned back to him with her brow furrowed in further puzzlement.

He jerked his head toward Harper and then the dollie. 'Do you believe in ghosts?' he asked, keeping his voice low. 'Because I think I do now. For real and for sure.'

'It could have been raccoons,' Rallie said. Her expression grew more horrified as she looked around. 'I thought one of us was supposed to stay awake. Isn't that what you said last night?'

'Raccoons? Really?'

Rallie nodded slowly like she was not so sure anymore. 'Or Harper did it. She was on watch.'

'She's not crazy,' Noah said. 'And she would have to be crazy to do this. Anyway, I thought you believed her ghost.'

Rallie pushed herself to her feet and walked around the woods, shivering. 'This is too much. I do not believe this. Animals ransacked the camp, or Harper was mad at us for wanting to go back and was trying to convince us to keep going. Either way, it was not a ghost.' I do- I do...

'I did. I do not know. It was fun to play along.'

Noah said, but as he said it, he realized that it still did feel like an adventure-even more than it had before-just not the same kind of adventure. He was scared. Little hairs were standing up along his arms, and he thought that Rallie was scared too. That was why she did not want to believe in ghosts anymore. 'It seemed like an adventure last night, right?'

But Noah wanted them to be real, wanted that desperately.

If they were real, then maybe the world was big enough to have magic in it. And if there was magic-even bad magic, and Noah knew it was more likely that there was bad magic than any good kind-then maybe not everyone had to have a story like his father's, a story like the kind all the adults he knew told, one about giving up and growing bitter. He might have been embarrassed to wish for magic back home, but there in the woods, it seemed possible. He looked over at the cruel, glassy eyes of the dollie, so close that she could have touched his face.

He thought about what Harper had said about how if they did not go on the quest right then, they never would. How if they faltered, they had never come back.

Nothing was better than no magic at all.

And he thought about his dream.

'It was Skylar,' Noah said. 'Her spirit's angry that we are not taking this quest seriously enough. She is mad that we got off the bus before we got to the right stop. Or she is mad that you want to go home.'

'I bet Harper got that story about Skylar and the bones from one of her library books. I am not trying to be mean. Harper makes everything more interesting, but sometimes she gets carried away, you know?'

'I'm sticking with the raccoon explanation,' Rallie said, picking up her coat and shouldering it on over her layers.

Harper, who had been the last one awake and who wanted to convince them both to stay on the quest. Who might have thought it was funny to put the Princess so close to him, knowing it would freak him out? 'What about the ashes? Those were real. 'He thought about that, turning the words over in his mind. Rallie was saying raccoons, but the rest of what she said pointed to Harper.

Rallie nodded, but not in a way that was agreeing. 'I keep thinking about them. She took some ash from a grill and mixed in pieces of chicken bone. It was dark when we both looked at it. People fake that on stage all the time.'

He had just dreamed about what Harper described, like the way that after you see a movie, you sometimes dream yourself into it. He had no way to know if any of it was true or if it was just his brain regurgitating stuff.

He remembered that he had wondered about the same thing the night before, about whether it was all a trick, but somewhere along the way he had become convinced, and he did not want to give that feeling up. He wanted to tell Rallie about his dream and insist it meant that she was wrong, but he realized it did not prove anything.

'Nope,' he said. 'I don't think so.'

Any food?'

Rallie had lost interest anyway, unzipping the front part of Noah's backpack and sticking her hand inside, fishing around. 'Do we have anything left?'

Her hand came out of his backpack, her fingers clutching a folded-up square of paper. She began to unfold it. He knew exactly what she was holding.

'What is this?' she asked, distracted by her discovery. 'A note? What is in here? Secret boy stuff?'

'Give it to me,' Noah said, grabbing the paper.

Rallie stood up, still reading, the smile sliding off her face. It was replaced with an expression of astonishment. Noah could see the scrawl of his handwriting across the page and the doodles decorating the margins. 'These are the Questions Harper gave you. You answered them. You told her you did not, but you did.'

'I did. Can I have them back now?' He stood too, starting toward her. He lunged forward to grab the note from her hand.

She danced out of his way. 'But why would you answer them when you were going to-?'

Rallie never got to finish because at that moment Harper jumped up from the sleeping bag with a shriek. She was crouching, blinking in the sunlight, her hands outstretched like she was ready to fight. It was a move of surprising awesomeness.

'Harper?' Noah asked.

To his relief, Rallie folded the note twice and shoved it into the pocket of her coat, then walked over to Harper. They sat back down together. Noah could see that Harper was still breathing hard.

'I dreamed that I was Skylar. I fell-' Harper said, pressing her hands against her face.

Noah did not speak for a long moment. He wondered if he was a bad person if he did not say anything about his dream. He wondered if Rallie would think he was ridiculous if he did. The leaves overhead rustled. 'You better look around,' he said finally. 'Did she seem angry? Because it looks like something trashed our camp.'

Harper stood up and dusted herself off, going over to the Princess and lifting her. The dolly's eyes moved to half-open, which made it appear as though she was watching them, the way his cat did when she was pretending to sleep.

'You think a ghost did this?' Harper asked finally, turning back toward them.

'It's classic poltergeist stuff, isn't it?' Noah asked.

'I don't,' Rallie said. 'It was raccoons. But I thought that you would say it was a ghost.'

'She's not a poltergeist,' Harper said, as though Noah had suggested her brand-new box set of Doctor Who DVDs were bootlegs. 'And why would she toss out our food? Ruin the only thing we must sleep on? She wants us to take her to East Eaton. She is not going to make it harder for us.'

Noah thought he detected a note of uncertainty in her voice, though.

'Okay, whatever,' he said. 'You think it was raccoons too?'

Harper looked around and sucked in her breath. 'I do not know. What if it was Kanth Jones? What if he followed us?'

A shiver went up against Noah's back, ending with a twitch between his shoulder blades. He could too easily imagine that weathered, smirking face watching them from the darkness. But there was no reason for Kanth to have gotten off the bus, followed them, waited for them to fall asleep, then tossed around their stuff. No reason at all. They did not have anything he wanted. He thought they would all be grabbed by aliens and get their faces stolen.

But Skylar had plenty of reasons to be mad at Rallie and was frustrated that she was not already in her grave.

'Look, I want to figure out what happened as much as you do,' said Rallie, looking between them like she was not sure which side she was on just then-maybe neither of theirs. 'But can we please get out of here first? The woods are creepy, and I must pee, and I am hungry.'

'We passed that donut shop last night,' Noah said.

There was not much to pack up, so they did not. The sleeping bag had been ruined along with the rest of their supplies, the long gashes making puffs of white stuffing well up with every gust of wind. The best they could do was gather up everything, roll up the wounded sleeping bag, and dump it all in one of the trash cans along the river.

Rallie nodded. 'Perfect. So long as they have a bathroom.'

No one else was there, but that did not mean that no one else had been.

They walked back along the highway and managed to find a spot to cross that was less crazy than jumping over the median. Then they walked quietly, heads bent against the chill air. Noah could smell the melting sugar and

rising dough of the shop blocks before he could see it. By the time he got to the door, he was practically drooling.

'How much money do we all have?' Harper asked.

'I've got fifteen dollars and fifty cents.' Noah had started with twenty-three dollars, but the bus ticket had cost him seven-fifty and it would be another seven-fifty to get back. Of the fifteen fifty he had, that left him with only eight dollars he could spend.

'I have twenty,' said Rallie.

'Eleven and a bunch of pennies,' said Harper. 'We should save something for later. For lunch and the trip back.'

There were cinnamon cider donuts, Boston cream and jelly crullers, chocolate sprinkles, rainbow sprinkles, maple cream, sour cream, old-fashioned, Juneberry, toasted coconut, bear claws, and apple fritters. And then beneath the glass of the counter, strange flavors-Froot Loops, peanut butter, ketchup, pickle juice, mandarin orange, honeycomb, lox and cream cheese, lobster, cheeseburger, fried chicken, wasabi, acorn flour, bubblegum, Pop Rocks, and spelled.

But as they opened the door, Noah's stomach growled, and saving money was the last thing on his mind. There were rows and rows of baskets along the back wall, each of them filled with a different flavor of the donut, their frostings bright under the lights.

The man behind the counter had a thick, wild head of black hair. It stuck up as though he had been electrocuted, except where it crawled down his cheeks into sideburns. 'Get your kids something?' he asked as the bell on the door rang. 'The wasabi donuts just came out of the fryer. They are still hot.'

They were also a muted green color and smelled spicy, like hot peppers.

'Uh,' Noah said, glancing at the menu. 'Can I have hot chocolate? A big one.'

He took his warm cup with its spirals of whipped cream to one of the small plastic tables. Rallie headed to the bathroom in the back while Harper ordered two more hot chocolates. They sat for a while, letting the heat of the paper cups warm their fingers.

Then they each ordered a donut. Noah got Pop Rocks, Rallie got maple cream, and Harper got Froot Loops. The crumbling cake was delicious, and there were real Pop Rocks inside that fizzed against Noah's tongue. He licked his fingers when he was done, forgetting that he had not washed his hands in an exceptionally long time.

The hot chocolates had been two-fifty apiece and the donuts were a dollar twenty-five, costing them each three seventy-five and leaving Noah with four twenty-five that he could spend for the whole rest of the trip. Harper had even less. He hoped she had at least twenty-five pennies, or she was not going to be able to pay her bus fare home.

Harper sat the Princess on a nearby chair. The dollie slumped, her head twisted on an angle, her hair rumpled as though she had been sleeping on it. Her half-closed eyes were bright with reflected light.

'If you died,' Harper said, keeping her voice low. 'Do you think you'd want to be a ghost?'

'Get revenge by doing what?' Rallie asked, laughing. 'You would be a disembodied spirit. What are you going to do? Yell 'boo!' at them? Try to convince them to go on a stupid road trip?'

'If I was murdered, then yes, definitely,' Noah said. 'So, I could haunt my killer and get revenge.'

'I could throw stuff around,' Noah reminded her.

'Maybe,' Rallie said. 'I would do it if I could be me, but see-through. The entire world would be like my television. I could visit the people I loved. But not if I had to repeat the same thing repeatedly, like haunting some stretch of road or going up and downstairs.'

'Even if you couldn't talk to anyone?' Noah asked.

Rallie looked briefly uncomfortable. 'I'd not there to be a ghost society with ghost friends.'

Harper pushed her hair back. 'Well, what if you decided you wanted to come back from the dead and then changed your mind, but you were stuck?'

Noah thought he had better interrupt that line of conversation. 'Would you want to be a ghost, Harper?'

'You mean like how I'm stuck here in East Rochester?' said Rallie, and then she took a big swallow of hot chocolate.

I had something important to tell him. Up there, I could see for miles-I could see the river and boats and the iceman's truck in front of a house down the street-but I kept slipping and catching myself on the copper gutters. And I heard this woman's voice from behind me, whispering to me, telling me I better get inside, or she was going to make me sorry. She had a broom, and she was sticking it out the window, trying to hit me.'

She shrugged. 'I do not know. Lingering around, whooshing past people who would never see me? It is scary to imagine things happening and me not being able to affect them. I keep thinking about the dream I had. It was like I was her-I was climbing around on the slate tiles of the roof of this giant house, trying to keep away from the windows while I waited for my father to get home.

Noah thought about his dream of the pinch-faced woman and the big Victorian house of flawed pottery. He wanted to tell her about the dream, but he felt a little silly about it. When he had woken, it had seemed so obvious that the dream was real, that it had been given to him by their ghost. But now, in the warmth of the donut shop, after Rallie was so certain there was no ghost, he was unsure about everything.

'Do you think that was really what happened?' Harper asked, leaning forward eagerly like there was only one possible right answer. 'Do you think she is trying to tell us about her death? Imagine that the whole time she was in the cabinet, she was just waiting for one of us to take her out.'

Noah opened his mouth to describe his dream, but it seemed as though not telling Harper and Rallie what had happened to his action figures or why he did not want to play made it hard to talk about other things too. It felt like everything was all mixed up together, weighing down his tongue.

The man moved behind the counter, dumping a fresh batch of peach muffins into a tissue-lined bin. 'No problem,' he called to them.

'Your blond friend sounds pretty hungry,' he said, coming out from behind the counter with a pink-glazed donut on a paper plate. He placed it down in front of the dollie. 'Here. On the house. It is Pepto-Bismol flavored. We are trying it out to see if it gets on the regular menu.'

'What?' Noah asked, confused.

As the man walked back into the kitchen, Noah could only stare at him. 'Did he-?' Noah whispered.

'It was just a joke,' Rallie said quickly, but she looked nervous. 'You know because we had a dollie. He was pretending it was real.'

'Because he thinks he's being a cool adult.' Rallie took another sip of her hot chocolate and then pushed it away as it had burnt her. She shuddered. Noah thought uncomfortably about what Aubrey had said on the walk home from school way back when. Somebody walks over your grave.

'Why would he do that?' Harper asked.

Your blond friend. There was something familiar about the words, though, something that snagged in Noah's mind. 'No, wait. Kanth. That is what he said on the bus- 'I'm not going to talk to the blonde.' Because he did not like the way she looked at him. Remember?'

'I remember that Rallie said. Harper nodded.

'Do you think he was talking about the dollie too?' Noah felt cold, and the food he had eaten churned in his stomach. He had wanted the ghost to be real, but the more real Skylar seemed, the more scared he was. He tried not to look over at the Princess. He tried not to think about what it meant that she sounded hungry. He tried not to notice that her cheeks seemed a little rosier today like she was feeding on something other than donuts.

They had to bury her, and they had to bury her soon.

'Okay, well...' Rallie said. She checked the face of her cell phone, then took out the map. It was ripped down the middle, but she rested it on the table, so all the streets lined up. 'It is ten forty-three now, and the next bus is not until four-thirty. There's time and all, but I must be on that bus.'

'East Eaton isn't that far,' said Harper. 'Noah said so last night. We could still make it. On foot... Like real adventurers.'

They were all quiet for a long moment.

'I'm going,' Harper said, picking up the dollie and cradling it in her lap. Her cheek rested against its pale bone China brow. Its eyes seemed more open than before. Pale milk glass with a black center. 'With or without you guys.' Her voice was small, though.

Noah thought about all the food thrown around the woods, about the slashed sleeping bag. And he wondered what else a ghost could do.

Have you ever heard of this one? When you drive past a cemetery, you must hold your breath. If you do not, the spirits of the newly dead can get in your body through your mouth and possess you.

But he had already decided. He was not turning back. 'I'm still up for an adventure,' he said with a nod. 'I'm in.'

So-o I am not going to be late. Okay?' Her voice got louder, and the words came out faster as she spoke, and when she finished there was a long silence. Rallie slapped her easily on the table like she was calling a meeting to order. 'I am not a coward. I care about adventures too, okay? It is not that. But I need to get home by tonight or my grandmother is going to lose her mind. She is going to call the police officers. She will make sure I do not go anywhere for months, and she will remind me of what I did whenever I ask for permission to do anything for the rest of my life. Forever.

'Okay,' Harper said finally.

'So-o, look, I want to go, but I want you to promise we will get back home today. The bus leaves here at four-thirty, and I want you to promise we are not going to miss it. Promise that we will turn around in time if we must. Promise me that you will get on it with me.'

'But what if we're almost there and-' Harper started.

'No way,' Rallie said. 'We still must get to the graveyard, bury the Princess, and find the bus station before the bus from East Eaton leaves-at three forty-five. If we make it to East Eaton and there's time, great, but remember that the bus leaves earlier from there. I will come with you, but if it does not look like we will make it, we will all come back together.'

'Then I'm going to the bus station now,' Rallie said, pushing back her chair and standing. 'You and Noah can adventure by yourselves. I am not going with you.'

Harper looked reluctant. 'I'm not going back without finishing this quest.'

'Wait,' Noah said, standing too and reaching for her. 'We started this together. We need to stay together. We can make it to East Eaton and still get home.'

'Harper,' Noah said.

Rallie folded her arms over her chest.

Noah put out his hand to pull Harper to her feet. 'We are already up. We are waiting for you.'

She sighed. 'Fine. But if we are going to make it by Rallie's deadline, we must go now. And we must go fast.'

Harper stood without letting him help, holding the Princess under her arm. 'You believe me now, don't you? About the dream. About the ghost. You believe me, right?'

Noah opened his mouth to tell her that he had dreamed about Skylar too. But just then, Rallie said, 'Sure we do,' and the moment passed.

The frosting was sickly sweet, but it was the bitter taste underneath that stayed on his tongue.

Instead, he picked up the Pepto-Bismol donut and bit into it.

CHAPTER TEN

First, he had pictured himself with a loyal steed that would have done most of the walking, so he had not anticipated the blister forming on his left heel or the tiny pebble that seemed to have worked its way under his sock so that even when he stripped off his sneaker, he could not find it. ADVENTURING TURNED OUT TO BE BORING. NOAH thought back to all the fantasy books he had read where a team of questers traveled overland and realized a few things.

He had not thought about how hot the sun would be either. When he put together his bunch of provisions, he never thought about bringing sunblock. Aragorn never wore sunblock. Sam never wore sunblock. Percy never wore sunblock. But despite all that precedent for going without, he was sure his nose would be lobster-red the next time he looked in the mirror.

He was thirsty, too, something that happened a lot in books, but his dry throat bothered him more than it had ever seemed to bother any character.

And, unlike in books where random brigands and monsters jumped out just when things got unbearably dull, there was nothing to fight except for clouds of gnats, several of which Noah was sure he had accidentally swallowed.

Also, it was not like they were walking through the awesome vistas of Middle Earth-a Forest full of Ent's or elves, a mountain pass brimming with orcs, and ice-they were mostly walking past industrial buildings and a bowling alley. Eventually, the warehouses thinned out until it was just a highway on one side and water on the other. They kept heading along the road, pausing occasionally to kick rocks or adjust their backpacks.

Rallie was walking ahead, with Noah behind her. She had a blade of grass and was trying to turn it into a whistle, a trick she claimed her uncle could do. So far all she had managed was to make a lot of spitting noises.

'I had an idea,' Harper said, speeding her pace to draw even with Noah. She was still carrying the Princess, the dollie settled against her hip like it was a child. He tried to keep his gaze from going to it. 'About Tommesings. About whom his father is.'

'You promised not to talk about the game.' He was tempted to, though. He wanted to know how the story would end since he would never get to play it. And he was bored.

'No,' Harper said with a trickster's smile. 'I agreed not to ask why you stopped playing. And I did not.'

Noah sighed. He was arguing because he thought he should, not because his heart was really in it. 'I had some ideas too,' he admitted.

Harper looked at him with astonishment. 'You did?'

'He is my character. But even if his father is the king of the whole Gray Country, he is going to stay a pirate. He is happy where he is, on Neptune's Pearl. No dad is going to change that.'

Harper was looking at him oddly like she wanted desperately to ask why he thought about any of this stuff since he had said he did not want to play anymore. But for once, she was smart and did not. 'Even if his father was the Jon of Deep winter Barrow?'

They did not have a dollie to represent him, but Jon was a bad guy, through and through. They had loved making up his crimes. He had been raising a zombie army of broken dollies to march over the rest of the lands. He had chopped off the heads of his enemies and abducted an evil priestess to be his duchess. Another action figure that Noah used to play had fought them over by

the Blue Hills and nearly died. He was being healed by one of Rallie's dollies, in a temple, she had made from a shoebox.

'That would be fairly good,' Noah said.

Harper looked flustered. She was good at making up stories, but she was not always good at accepting the stuff he and Rallie made up, no matter how awesome it was. It took her a little while to accept a universe she did not have total control over.

'If Tommesings was Jon's son, then he could get close enough to assassinate him. Or he could say that he was Jon's son-he is someone else's kid entirely. Someone even better. Like an ancient pirate lord or monster.'

Rallie halted abruptly.

The path had ended. Up ahead, another big fat river flowed into Ohio, making it impossible to go farther. Two bridges spanned the river, but he could see that they were useless to three kids on foot. One was a railway bridge, rusted and abandoned, with large gaps where metal rails had fallen off. The other was a massive concrete three-lane highway, with a toll booth on one side and no room for walking on the shoulder.

'Well, that's that,' Rallie said. She had a strange expression on her face, half relief, and half disappointment.

If this were a book or a movie, they would meet a mysterious figure with a boat and that person would ferry them across. Like Charon. Probably try to trick them too-but if they were clever, they could make it. And if he were Tommy sings, he would not need to be ferried across because he would have Neptune's Pearl-his two-mast-ed schooner-and all his crew. Noah sighed, gazing up along the waterway. There were shabby-looking marinas on either side of the big unknown river.

But in real life, those things did not matter. He was suddenly aware of how tired he was.

'Let us go ask,' Harper said. 'Maybe there's a ferry?'

It was only a little afternoon, so they walked down to the marina. The few buildings-an oversized boat storage area, a lean-to, and an office-sat beside three long docks, with an array of boats separated by berms. Two little kids were leaning over the side of a piling with a fishing net, watching something in the water.

'You want to split up?' Noah asked. 'See if we can find somebody who might know how to cross?'

'Okay,' said Rallie, glancing toward the office. 'Let us meet back here in five minutes.'

'I'm going to talk to those kids,' Harper said, turning to head in their direction.

As he wandered, he spotted an old rowboat, pulled up to one side of the dry dock, and leaned against some pilings. The paint was chipped along the sides, and he did not see any oars, but for a moment, he imagined them ferrying themselves across. As he got closer, though, he saw the hull had enough rot damage to keep it from being seaworthy. He did not need to know much about boats to know they would leak like crazy if he put them in the water.

He walked a little way, inhaling the smell of diesel and river and tar baking in the sun. The day had turned warm, and Noah wondered if it would be possible to swim across. He wondered if Rallie had had the right idea, going into the main building. There was air-conditioning and even a water fountain up there.

Despite reading tons about pirates and drawing Neptune's Pearl in such detail that he had figured out most of the rigging, and even building model ships, Noah had never been on a boat.

With a sigh, he studied the sleek motorboats, shaped like long cigars, and the towering, multilevel fishing vessels with tall antennae shooting off them like whiskers on a cat. He could not imagine the sort of people who owned boats like that, but he was sure that they did not give kids rides just for asking.

He took another look at the rowboat and wondered if it might be possible to patch it. He could find some nails and wood glue and tar. And if that did not work, then maybe they could boil water faster than the boat could sink.

'Noah!'

He turned at the sound of his name being shouted. Harper was standing next to the two kids with the net and waving him over.

'Brian's dad is trying to sell a dinghy,' she said when Noah stepped onto the dock. It dipped underneath him, and he steadied himself, lamenting his lack of sea legs.

'Uh-huh,' he said warily. They had fifteen dollars before they dipped into the funds for the way back. 'How much does he want for it?'

'Twenty-five.' Harper glanced at Noah's watch and raised her eyebrows. 'But Brian said that we could trade if we had anything he wanted. And he will throw in oars.'

'There's no other way across?'

She shook her head, making her red hair fly around her. The sun had pinned her nose and deepened her freckles. 'There is another bridge, but it is more than a mile away. If we are on the water, Brian says we can make it to East Eaton in half an hour. Easy.'

Brian nodded. 'We go up that way to fish sometimes. It is not far,' the other kid said.

'Okay,' Noah said. 'Let us see this thing.'

Brian pointed to the one on the end, painted a slate gray. It was beat-up, up but afloat, with no visible leaks. A lot better than the rotted-out one Noah had found near the dry dock.

Brian led them down to the end of the dock, where a few small dinghies and rowboats were moored. Three rowboats rocked gently beside one another, buffered by plastic fenders.

'Can you give us a second to talk it over?' Noah asked.

Brian shrugged and headed back to where his friend was taking control of the net, trailing it through the water like he was going to catch something by sheer accident. As Noah watched the kid go, he saw Rallie crossing the gravel-covered yard toward them.

Her coat was tied around her waist. She looked determined and sweaty and a little bit hopeful. Her angular face and thin eyebrows were utterly familiar, but he realized for the first time that she looked like one of those older, mysterious girls he wondered at sometimes in the mall, and that made her strange to him.

It was interesting watching her when she did not notice herself being observed.

'I'll trade that, though.'

'All I've got is a necklace,' Harper said, touching the thin blue chain around her neck protectively. She wore a tiny typewriter key charm on it. He had not seen her without it since she had it from her father on her birthday.

'I've got my watch and a flashlight,' Noah said. 'And a book I'm fairly sure they don't want.'

I know you are going to be mad, but he said it was impossible, Harper.' She sighed. 'I'm sorry.' Rallie walked up to them, pushing back her braids impatiently. 'Hey, look, guys, I talked to an old guy up at the marina office. He said there was no way to walk to East Eaton.

'What if we don't go on foot?' Harper said, pointing to the grayish boat.

'Do we even know which way the current of the river runs?' Rallie asked. 'Or anything about boats?'

Noah itched to be on the water, even in the little dinghy.

Harper looked momentarily thrown, then she frowned. 'What is to know? We just row harder if the current is against us.'

'You promised we'd go back,' Rallie said. 'Both of you said that if we could not get to East Eaton in time to get the bus, we would go back to East Rochester. Well, it is time to turn around.'

'Seriously?' Rallie asked them. 'You're going to break your promises?'

Harper hesitated, and Noah stayed silent far too long.

'It's not that,' Noah said, looking longingly at the water. 'It's just that I think we can still make it.'

'Yes?' he said, trying to sound like he did not care, like he did not even know what she was going to threaten him with. He did know, though, and he did care.

Rallie's expression hardened into a tight, unfriendly smile. Her eyes shone like chips of glass. 'Oh no, you have to come back with me,' she told Noah. 'Even if Harper doesn't come with us.' 'Tell me?' Harper asked. 'Wait, what do you mean? Tell me what?'

'I'll tell her,' Rallie said. 'That you lied, and what you lied about.'

'Nothing,' Noah said, stepping back from them. He took a deep breath of diesel and river muck. He could not think all he knew was that if Harper found

out about the Questions, she would never stop picking at his reasons for lying about them until the whole story came out. Imagining that filled him with nameless panic. 'Rallie is right about us promising. If she wants to go back, then-.'

He remembered; too late, how much Harper hated her friends' keeping secrets from her.

Harper interrupted him, looking at Noah as if she stared hard enough, she could read his mind. 'What don't you want me to find out?'

'It's nothing,' Noah insisted.

'Then tell me,' Harper said. She hesitated a moment, then looked at Rallie. 'Tell me.'

'No way,' said Harper. 'I could tell Noah something that I bet you do not want him to know, Rallie. I know a secret too.'

'Come on,' Rallie said. 'Give up. The game's over. We are going back. Let us all just go back. It was still fun. It was still a quest.'

Rallie had talked about how much she hated him or said that he smelled or how stupid he was. She had made fun of him to Harper, snickering behind his back.

Rallie's whole face changed. He wondered if he had been so transparent if it had been as clear when he had figured out just what he had to lose. And he understood, right then, why Harper was so upset about Noah and Rallie not telling Harper things. Because whatever Rallie did not want Harper to say had to be bad.

'You wouldn't do that,' Rallie said, her voice hushed. 'You are my best friend. That is a secret.'

'Just tell me,' Noah said. 'Come on. Whatever it is, I will not be mad. At least I do not think I will be mad.'

Harper laughed, and Noah thought he saw a strange dancing light in the glass eyes of the dollie, as though the Princess was laughing too. When Harper spoke, her voice was different. 'She is not going to tell you. I won against blackmail. Rallie must come, and since you must do what she wants, you must come too. So come on, let us buy this boat.' She could be mean sometimes, but never did she seem gleeful about being cruel.

'I do not care. You did not care about me, and now I do not care about you either,' said Harper.

'You don't understand how much trouble I'm going to get in,' Rallie said, running her fingers through her braids.

'But you promised!' Rallie said, her voice anguished.

'I don't care,' Harper repeated.

Noah paced down the dock, too angry at everyone to be ready to give in to anyone, especially those kids with their fishing nets who were going to try and talk him out of all the cash they had. And he looked back at the three rowboats and the dinghy, which, now, under his resentful gaze, looked increasingly shabby. He glanced at Rallie, who was staring at the water in agony of indecision.

None of it was right. This was not how their quest was supposed to go.

He had read lots of stories where heroes succeeded despite long odds, where they accomplished a task that everyone else had failed. He wondered for the first time about all the people who had gone before those heroes, about whether they had been heroic too or whether they had been in each other's throats before everything had gone wrong.

At the very end of the dock, Noah stopped. He drew in his breath.

He wondered if there was a point where they realized they were not going to make it, were not going to beat those long odds that in the legend that would follow, they were going to be the nameless people that failed.

In front of him was a tiny sailboat, low and slim, only a little bigger than the dinghy, but made from fiberglass. A black-and-white striped sail was folded loosely around the boom, the symbol of a sunfish visible on the Dacron cloth. Someone must have just left it, intending to come right back, because the centerboard was pulled out and there were two life jackets piled together in the cockpit.

Across the stern was one word in a curling script: PEARL.

Noah jumped down onto the hull, his sneakers hitting the curved deck. The boat rocked wildly underneath him, and he had to pinwheel his arms and grab the mast to steady himself. With a grin breaking across his face, he looked up at Rallie and Harper.

'We're not buying anything,' he said. 'We're pirates, remember?'

Their twin expressions of disbelief only made his smile wider.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The boat rocked lightly. When her foot touched the edge of the deck, though, it tipped dangerously toward her. Noah threw his weight hard to the other side, hoping to balance it out. Harper staggered, falling to her knees with a yelp. After a few moments of wobbling, the boat settled. HARPER NEARLY CAPSIZED THE BOAT GETTING INTO IT. Noah sat in the center, fingers splayed against the hull, with his legs in the shallow cockpit as she climbed down rungs drilled into one of the pilings. First, she handed him her backpack, which he dumped next to his, in a small cavity under the centerboard.

'You're next,' Noah called up to Rallie. 'If Harper goes to the prow and I stay in the center, it will not be as hard for you to come aboard. At least I think it will not be hard.'

'Wow,' she said, trailing her fingers through the water and lifting them like it was marvelous to be so close to the river and not swimming in it. 'We're doing this thing.'

'Let me cast off the lines first,' Rallie said, beginning to untie the boat from the pilings.

'I don't know if that's such a clever idea,' Noah said. 'We can untie them from here and leave the ropes.'

Starboard was to the right and the port was to the left. The boom was the other metal part that the sail attached to, making the L shape that swung the sail where it was supposed to be to catch the wind. And the rudder was the part that you steered with. But that was just vocabulary, and none of it would help him at all if he could not recall the principles.

Noah tried to remember everything he had read about sailing, which was a lot. The prow was the point of the boat and the aft was the back end-he was sure about that. And the stern was another word for the back end. The mast was the important thing sticking up from the center of the boat.

Rallie put her hand on her hip. 'What if we must dock in East Eaton? We cannot dock without a rope.'

At first, the Pearl swung closer to the piling, one of the boat's fenders bumping against the floats holding up the dock. But while Rallie scampered down the piling, the Pearl began to drift away from the dock.

He could not argue with that, but he could worry as the boat, no longer held by a line at its bow, began to angle more sharply in its berth. Then Rallie untied the aft line.

In books, Noah remembered, there was the pole that you used to cast off, hooking onto the dock to hold the boat in place once the ropes were released, and pushing off with the pole when everyone was on. He did not have anything like that. He scrambled to grab hold of the piling, but it was too late.

'Jump!' Noah yelled at Rallie. 'Now!'

They were moving. They had pirated a boat.

And she did. She pushed herself off the piling and half fell into the cockpit, making Noah crouch low to keep his balance. The boat sat lower in the river with a third person weighing it down, water sloshing up over the edges of the hull, but it did not tip over. As Noah pushed off the far piling that marked the outer edge of the berth, he realized that they had done it.

For better or for worse, they were on Beaver River, the current swinging them toward Ohio. The wind overhead gusted with the promise of good sailing.

And although Rallie had not even wanted to come, she was laughing. You just let out the sail-Noah remembered that term and that it involved letting the sail billow, which must be done with one of the three ropes attached to the deck, although he was not exactly sure which one-and the sail filled with lots of air, which propelled the boat straightforward.

Sailing was supposed to be simple, so long as the wind was right behind you.

At least that was how all the books said it was supposed to work. But reading about it and doing it were completely different. He understood the theory, the ropes, figuring out the wind, and positioning yourself on the boat, but he could not seem to make the Sunfish sail. They sat in the water, pushed around by the current, spinning slowly.

But if the wind was coming from the side-which it usually was-then things were harder. You still caught the wind, but because of the keel on the

bottom of the boat, instead of just moving away from where the wind was blowing, you mostly went straight. Mostly.

Harper was strapping herself into one of the life vests, while Noah flailed around, overwhelmed, pretending to know what he was doing, pulling on ropes, and testing things out. She offered the other vest to Rallie, who took it grudgingly. Although Rallie seemed to have accepted that they were continuing the quest, she had not come close to forgiving Harper. It was a very tiny boat, but Rallie managed to sit as far from Harper as possible.

Noah wanted to say something to them, to make them talk to each other, but it was hard to concentrate on that while he was pulling on lines to lift the sail. They were coming up on the two bridges. The first one was high enough not to present much of a problem, but the second had more pylons underneath it, and Noah wanted to be sure they steered wide of those.

He suddenly remembered that he had not dropped the rudder. Crawling to the stern of the boat, he pushed it down and grabbed the tiller so he could start to steer. Rallie started working on the sail. It billowed wildly, flapping back and forth, the boom swinging to the right.

'Tighten it,' he yelled, and she did, pulling the rope until the wrinkles went out of the sail. And suddenly they were moving. Spray splashed up off the water and wet their hair and faces like raindrops. The wind ruffled Noah's hair.

Starboard, some part of his brain reminded him.

Despite the fear of Harper finding out about the Questions and the weirdness of Harper and Rallie having some secret, at that moment he felt happy. He loved the feeling of the river beneath them and ahead of them and behind them. He was the captain of a real ship; a real ship called the Pearl. It was too much magic to bear, but for once he did not question it. He threw back his head and grinned up into the Jon of the sky.

'We're going to flip!' Harper yelled. On either side the banks were green, occasionally punctuated with oil tanks and industrial buildings and a few stretches of houses. Rallie let out the sail more, and the boat sped, tilting starboard, the port side rising and making them lean against it with their feet balanced against the edge of the cockpit, trying to flatten things out. They were cutting through the water, faster and faster.

'Hold on,' said Rallie.

Harper scrambled into the cockpit and got the Princess from her pack, zipping the dollie beneath her hoodie. 'In case we flip,' she said. 'I'm afraid of her going overboard.'

Noah pushed the tiller so that they moved to the left, and they slowed a little, flattening. The sail began to laugh, flapping noisily, and Rallie tightened it to their new, slower speed. That had been exhilarating but also scary.

'Obviously, I don't,' Harper told him.

'Don't you think she'd be safer where she was?' Noah asked.

It took a while to get used to what made the boat move faster when to let out the sailor tighten it, what to do when the wind changed slightly (which it seemed to do every ten minutes), and how to stay out of the way of other boats.

Rallie raised both her eyebrows as if to remind Noah that Harper was crazy.

They sailed for what seemed like hours but was only a single hour. Usually, when Noah was doing something, even walking, he could kind of zone out and think about other things. But handling the boat was like playing basketball-it demanded every bit of his attention. Maybe if he had been more experienced at it, things would have been different, but half the time he was terrified that the boat was going to topple over because it was zooming along at such a steep angle. The other half of the time, the sail hung slack, and he barely could get it to move.

'Do you think Pearl's owner has noticed their boat's gone?' Harper asked as they passed a rocky island rising on the right-hand curve of the river. A few scrub trees grew on it.

Occasionally, a massive barge would pass by, sending a wake that forced them to grip onto anything they could as the sailboat careened from side to side, nearly throwing them off like a bull at a rodeo.

Noah shifted uncomfortably. When he had played Tommy sings the Blade robbing people, he was always able to find a good excuse-mostly that that was bad guys-but in real life, excuses felt different. 'When we dock in East Eaton, we will call the marina and tell them where the Pearl is. The owners will be able to pick up the boat, so hopefully, they will not worry for too long.'

Rallie pointed to the island, clearly not listening to Noah and Harper. 'It seems like anything could be there, doesn't it? I bet no one has ever stepped foot on the shore. Imagine if there was a gateway next to one of those rocks and no one knew it because everything that goes there disappears.'

Noah looked at the island as they sailed past, imagining.

Around the curve was an industrialized stretch of river with houses along the eastern shore and pipes, tanks, and barges along with the other. Many were docked, and a few powerboats raced between them, making the water choppy. The constant rocking of the boat made it hard to steer. Noah's muscles were sore from leaning hard in one direction, and his clothes were soaked through with spray.

Rallie checked her phone.

'What time is it?' Noah asked her.

'About two forty,' she said. 'We've got an hour to get there and find the bus station.'

Harper looked over nervously. Even though this had started as her plan, Noah thought that she looked as worried as the rest of them.

'This is taking longer than we thought,' Harper said finally. 'Longer than those boys said.' He and Rallie had gotten good at sailing the little boat. They were going faster, catching the wind, and skimming through the water like a bike speeding downhill.

Noah was tempted to point out that it would have taken a lot longer if they were rowing, but he did not. Even though they did not have much time, he was still feeling pleased.

Noah leaned back and watched the shoreline, watched the woods turn to town and highway, and then back to woods again, watched the few houses built close enough to the river that he could spot them. In other places, houses on the river would have been big estates with their private docks and vast lawns, but there were regular houses like it was no big deal to live on the water.

The city beyond them reminded him a little of a more sprawling version of his town-a couple of nice Victorian houses with boarded-up windows and a sluggish central square. There was a small metal bridge, which the boat was about to pass beneath. He could hear the rattle of cars across its metal supports. Up ahead, the river curved south.

Then they passed more industrial buildings, these a lot older looking, with crumbling chimneys reaching into the sky.

'Wait,' Harper said, pointing back at the town they had just passed. 'You must turn around. That is East Eaton. That is the old pottery factory. Look.'

Noah half stood; he was so surprised. 'Turn around? Do you understand that the current is running the way we have been sailing? And the wind-if we turn about, we are going against the wind.'

'But we've got to go back.' Harper's eyes were wide. 'We missed it.'

'Okay,' he said. 'So, you swing the boom, and I'll pull the tiller.'

He looked at Rallie and he could see the blank terror on her face. She had no more idea how to turn a sailboat around than he did.

Rallie nodded. Noah steered toward the sandy bank to give them plenty of room to come about. 'When the sail shifts, we're going to have to change sides too,' he told Harper. 'So, get ready.'

The water was shockingly cold, and the impact of it rattled him down to his bones. He grabbed the side of the boat.

He pulled on the tiller, and Rallie pulled in the rope so that the sail tightened and swung. The boat turned in a single graceful movement, and then, with the wind and the current coming at them the wrong way and almost no idea what they were doing, the boat listed to one side and went over, dumping them all into the river.

Rallie sputtered to the surface. Harper was treading water, holding on to the mast and the sail.

Noah swam to the keel, which rose from the hull like a shark's fin. 'Get clear for a second.'

Noah threw his weight against the hull, and it righted itself, its sail lifting off the water. He scrambled to pull himself on board.

Harper kicked away from the boat, dog paddling toward Rallie.

Rallie lunged at Harper. 'This is enough. The end. Enough with the creepy dollie and the lying and the trying to make this true.' With those words, her hand darted out and snatched the dollie from where it was half-zipped inside Harper's wet hoodie.

Rallie heaved herself onto the deck, and then both grabbed Harper, who kept one arm pressed across her chest to hold the dollie in place even as she was hauled onto the boat. Another barge was passing to their left, creating a rippling wake that made their boat rock wildly again. And Noah could see that two barges followed it. For a moment they just drifted farther in the wrong direction, sail slack, holding on.

Harper screeched, and Noah gasped, but it was too late. Rallie threw it overhand, up, and out toward the barge and the deep water.

Everything froze for a long moment. The Princess hit the waves with barely a splash, the water seeming to soak her dress in slow motion, drawing it down. Her hair spread in a golden wave, and her dull black eyes looked up at them as she bobbed for a moment before sinking in a froth of bubbles.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOAH DIDN'T THINK ABOUT IT, THE DOVE.

He kicked now, over, and over, toward the Princess, reaching for her, opening his eyes in the murky brown river.

When he was a little kid, his mom took him to swimming classes at the YMCA. He remembered the bleachy smell of the chlorine and the feel of the orange swimming inflated too tightly against his upper arms and the way all the kids' shouting bounced off the ceiling to echo. And he remembered how to kick like a frog.

His fingers closed on a scrap of her dress. Striking his other hand out hard, he caught her arm and hauled her to him. For a moment, the cold deadweight of her small China body seemed warm against his. Before he could think too much about that, he was swimming toward the surface. His head broke through the waves, and he sucked in a grateful lungful of air.

His whole body was shaking with cold. His teeth chattered. His toes had gone numb. Behind him, Harper and Rallie were fighting, but it was hard to focus on their words.

The sailboat was at a strange angle, closer to shore. The waves had carried it to shallower water, where the keel caught in the mud. The Pearl had run aground.

Then the wake of the barge hit, the waves sending him under again, this time without him holding his breath. He came up choking.

They were shouting at each other, but Noah did not pay attention. The water was too cold, and it took too much energy for him to do anything but put his head down and swim.

The girls were wading through the shallow water.

He kicked and kicked and kicked.

Harper was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, looking bedraggled and miserable. Her lips were Jon with cold. Rallie had sloughed off her coat somewhere and had her arms around herself like she was trying to physically restrain herself from shivering.

Clutching the Princess to his chest, leaving only a single free arm with which to paddle, reaching the shore seemed to take forever. And when he finally got there, the bank of the Ohio River was muddy, sucking at his feet, making wading ashore even harder than swimming had been.

'The backpacks are gone,' Rallie said. 'They must have fallen out when the boat rolled the first time.'

He had not even thought about it. He did not even remember deciding. He had just known that if he did not, he would lose something he was not ready to give up.

Noah sank onto the sandy, muddy bank and looked at the dollie in his arms. The Princess's dress was torn, and it seemed ready to disintegrate further as it dried. One of her arms had been pulled free from the socket and was hanging limply from a dirty string. He stared down at her and wondered why he had been willing to jump back into a freezing river to get her.

'What time is it?' Rallie asked. 'My phone's dead.'

He looked at his watch. The center of the crystal face had fogged up, but even if it had stopped, it could not be too far off. 'Three twenty.'

'We've got to get moving,' Rallie said, clearly panicked. 'Get up. We must go.'

As the Princess's dull black eyes rolled up at him, he remembered what Harper had said about breathing in the dead. Maybe when he had opened her bag of ashes, he had inhaled some by accident. And if that were true, then maybe she could possess him anytime she wanted, just like the dead people

who possessed you when you passed by graveyards. He wanted to drop her on the riverbank, but his hands would not obey him.

Noah's feet felt like they were filled with lead. 'Rallie...' We are not going to make it, he wanted to tell her. There is no way. We do not even know where we are going. But he could see on her face that she already knew all those things. That she had figured them out on the boat before she had hurled the Princess into the waves.

Rallie walked with determination, and although Noah was not sure she knew where she was going, he and Harper followed her.

'How could you-?' Harper said to her but then bit off the end of the sentence as Rallie stalked off. Harper pulled the dollie from Noah's hands silently. He let her take it.

They stumbled through the woods and then along the side of an empty stretch of road, past a raggedy wire fence that looked like it was keeping zombies back after an apocalypse rather than cows. As they tripped over rocks and stumps, wet hair sticking to their faces and necks, soaked socks squelching in their shoes, the silence stretched between them, making him even more panicked. Noah kept looking at his watch, which was not running entirely right anymore but still seemed to be ticking along faster than he wanted.

At three-fifty-four, when the bus was well and truly gone, she whirled on Harper.

They were all shivering. Rallie kept asking what time it was in a smaller and smaller voice. At three-thirty, she kept marching with grim determination. At three thirty-four, she sped up to a near run. At three thirty-seven, she started to cry, quietly and to herself. He reached out a hand toward her, but she gave him such a terrible look that he pulled back and left her alone. At three-forty-three, she set her jaw and kept going.

'I thought maybe if she were gone, you'd go back to normal,' Rallie said. 'I know you are just making all this up. Stop acting like it is so important like you believe in it. You have Noah fooled, but you do not fool me.'

'You promised this wouldn't happen!' she shouted. 'You promised, and then you broke your promises repeatedly, and now my whole life is going to be ruined because of you!'

'You never cared about the quest!' Harper shouted back. 'You threw Skylar into the water. You threw her away like she was garbage.'

'I don't-'

'Is that what you are mad about? About Noah?'

Harper whirled on Noah. 'She loooooves you. That is her big secret. She wants you to be her boyfriend and go to the movies with her and make kissy faces. That is the only reason she even came with us.'

Noah took a step back, glancing over at Rallie, expecting her to deny it.

And it did not matter anyway. They were all cold and miserable, and he had to do something before the fight they had been having all along bubbled over into something so bad that it could not be taken back.

Her trembling hands went to cover her face. She and Harper were both shivering as hard as he was. But she did not deny anything, and he did not have room in his brain to know how to process that. He felt a little embarrassed and a lot shocked.

Now I know why Noah is sick of you. He answered those questions you gave him; you know. He cares about the game, even if he is lying about it. He still wants to play. He just does not want to play with you anymore. And you know what? I do not either. He hates you, and I hate you too.'

'Rallie-' he started, not sure what he was going to say, but hoping he would figure it out as he spoke.

She shook her head, keeping her eyes on Harper. 'Of course, you would say that. You are horrible.'

Then, as Harper stared at her, stunned, her skin flushed in that blotchy way it got, Rallie turned and ran from both. She pushed her way into the tangled brush of the woods.

'I don't hate you,' Noah told Harper. He hesitated a moment and then raced after Rallie.

He had been hurt and mad and afraid of letting anyone see how he felt. But he had thought they would go on being Harper and Rallie, playing the same game, being best friends, sleeping over at each other's houses.

He knew he had been the bad friend, the liar, the one that had started everybody fighting.

He had taken it for granted that he would be able to go back to being friends later if he wanted, and everything would be the way he had left it. He had counted on that.

It did not take long to find Rallie. She was sitting with her back against a tree, head tipped forward so that her wet braids hung in her face. He thought that she had been crying again, but he was not sure. The skin around her eyes was red and swollen.

But he had messed up everything.

'You didn't have to go look for me,' she said.

He went over and sat beside her. 'Why did you say all that stuff?'

'You were good on the boat. At sailing.' Which sounded lame now that he heard the words aloud, although it had made sense in his head.

She shook her head, not looking up. 'I don't know.'

Noah had no idea how to make things better. He wanted to ask her if it was true that she liked him, but he did not want to make her more upset-and since she had gotten pretty upset already, it was true. But he was not sure why she had been willing to follow Harper onto the boat just to keep Noah from finding out. It was not an insult or anything. It was a compliment.

She shrugged.

Noah had not thought about asking a girl out in any tangible way, but if he were going to ask a girl out to get pizza or play video games, he would want her to be like Rallie.

The silence stretched until, unexpectedly, she broke it. 'It was fun.' She smiled lopsidedly. 'Sailing. Even if we capsized. And I cannot believe you stole that boat.'

She did not reply, and he did not want another moment of awkwardness. He gathered his courage. 'I am sorry about everything. We should have gone back before. You were right. I will tell your grandmother it was all our fault.'

'We'll call the marina,' he said, only a little defensively. 'So, it'll only be stolen for a little while.' 'It does not matter. That is not even what I am mad about.' Rallie leaned her head against the tree. 'I mean, I am, but there's more.'

He waited, unsure of what she was going to say next.

Noah nodded... 'There was all that stuff with the donut guy and the crazy bus guy seeming to see her, and there was the camp getting messed up, and-and I had a dream about Skylar last night in the woods. Just like Harper. It was not the same dream, but it was the same.'

'Do you think there's a ghost that talks to Harper?' Rallie asked. 'I am not asking if you believe in ghosts. I am asking if you believe in this ghost.'

'You did...?' Rallie did not look happy to hear it.

'I should have said something before,' he told her.

'It's just-' Rallie looked down at her hands. She clenched them. 'I do not want to believe in Skylar. I do not want there to be a ghost that is talking to Harper-and now, to you.'

'You can't be jealous-'

She cut him off, talking amazingly fast. 'You do not understand. There cannot be a ghost, a real ghost. Because if there is, then some random dead girl wants to haunt Harper, but my dead parents cannot be bothered to come back and haunt me.'

Rallie wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. They were wet and glittering with all the tears she was holding back. 'What if we bury the Princess and Skylar is gone? What if we put her to rest? What if it is real? Does that mean that my parents did not even care enough to say goodbye? I did not even have a single stupid dream. Not one.' He felt like a jerk for not even considering it. Now that he had, he was not sure there was anything he could say to Rallie that would not make him a bigger jerk. He was helpless.

Everything seemed to pause, as though the universe had taken a moment to draw its breath.

He remembered Rallie's parents only vaguely. He recalled sitting on a linoleum floor, playing Matchbox cars with Rallie in a sunny yellow kitchen while her mother made them toast with jam, her father wearing crazy ties to his job at the courthouse-and, of course, Noah remembered that they had died. But he

did not think of them as dead, the way ghosts were dead. And he had never thought about how it would be to go on a quest to dig a grave when your parents were already in one.

'Maybe after we die, we don't get choices like that.' He crouched down next to her. 'And it probably sucks to be a ghost.'

Snapping twigs made them both lookups. Noah stood. Harper was walking toward them, wearing an uncomfortable expression, half relief, and half dismay.

'I found the way to town,' she said.

Rallie snorted, the corner of her mouth lifting. 'Maybe,' she said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Noah, Harper, and Rallie walked past him, still trailing water, their shoes making squelching sounds. Harper hugged the Princess to her chest, the dolly's face turned so that he could not see if her cheeks had grown even rosier. Next, they passed a gaming store with a few bikes leaning against the pavement and a couple more chained to a nearby STOP sign. And finally, they came to a diner, the only restaurant they had seen was open.

They stopped to gaze at the menu on the door.

'I have four dollars and twenty-five cents-aside from the bus fare home,' Noah said. 'How much do you guys have?'

ALTHOUGH THE MAIN STREET OF EAST EATON was full of big store windows and shops, many were no longer open at all. There was a place called Pants Unlimited that was covered in flyers advertising FINAL SALE! on everything since they were going out of business, but by the aged look of the flyers, they might have been going out of business for years. The store owner stood in the doorway, smoking a cigarette.

'That I can spend?' said Harper. 'Zero.'

'Eight seventy-five,' said Rallie, pushing up her dress to rifle through the pockets of the jeans she had on underneath.

'So, not much before we start dipping into our bus fare home,' Harper said... 'But something...'

Rallie looked grim at the mention of the bus, but did not say anything, which was good, but also made Noah nervous. From the woods, the three of them had only said things having to do with figuring out where they were going. He could not decide if the girls did not want to fight anymore or if they were gearing up for an even bigger fight that was about to come.

Somehow, he had become at the center of their conflict, and he could tell it was just a matter of time before they figured out that they did not have to be mad at each other-he was the one they should both be mad at. He was the one who had messed up the game, the one who had hidden the Questions, the one who Rallie-the one who Rallie liked, which was weird too. It was not like he had not thought about girls or even he had never thought about Rallie like that. He had. But, asking her out? The idea was paralyzing.

'Okay,' Noah said, pushing open the door to the diner. 'Let us go in.'

A woman standing behind the register, her white hair in short beauty-parlor curls, looked them up and down skeptically, as though she was trying to decide if they were trouble. 'You can't track mud all over the place,' she said finally.

The dinner was warm, with a round display of desserts near the register that turned, showing huge cakes and pies piled with icing and oozing filling. There were little glass dishes of Jell-O and others of rice pudding studded with raisins, each one covered in plastic wrap.

Noah could smell something frying in the back, and his stomach lurched with hunger.

'Sorry,' said Rallie, taking a step forward, putting on her best-acting face. 'We were out racing our sailboat and got really into it. A little too much, I guess. We just wanted to get something warm to eat before we went back. The water was cold.'

The woman behind the register smiled, like the idea of healthy outdoor activity had made their mud-stained appearance wholesome. Or she figured those kids with sailboats had money, however bad they looked. 'Well, okay, but you go dry off in the back first. Table for four?'

'Three,' Rallie said, and the woman blinked in confusion.

Noah narrowed his eyes at the dollie, hanging limply in Harper's arms.

'Come on.' Harper took Rallie's arm and hauled her toward the bathrooms. As she walked, she looked back at the white-haired woman at the register. 'Table for four is fine.'

Noah went into the men's bathroom. There was a row of three urinals and a single stall, all in baby-Jon tile, with paintings of the Ohio River in the olden days hanging high on the walls. He walked over to the sinks, took off his shoes, and rinsed them off. Then he took off his jeans, wiped dirt and bits of grass from the cuffs, and tried to dry them the best he could with a combination of paper towels and a hand dryer.

They stuck to his legs, damp, and chill. He looked back into the mirror, seeing a slightly sunburnt boy looking back at him, older than he remembered himself, with a familiar mess of brown-black hair and black eyes that seemed to say: I hope you know what you are doing.

Finally, he wrung out his shirt over one of the sinks, hand-combed his wet hair, and put his jeans back on.

When he left the bathroom, Rallie and Harper were already sitting in a banquette. They waved in his direction, and he slid in just as their server arrived.

She was only a little older than they were, with pink lipstick, blunt-cut black hair, and a nose ring. Handing over the menus, she paused to stare at the Princess, lolling beside Harper.

'Super scary.'

'Your dollie?'

The waiter said, pointing. Dirt from the riverbed was in the grooves of her nose and mouth and was turning her blond ringlets into thick clumps.

'Oh, yes,' said Rallie, with a dark look in Harper's direction. 'The scariest.'

The server smiled, handed them the menus, and walked off. Noah was only glad that it seemed like she was seeing a dollie, instead of whatever Kanth Jones, the donut guy, and the Girl at the register had seen. He pushed the thought out of his mind and studied the menu. They had twelve seventy-five that they could spend and still get home-and that was budgeting on loaning Harper a quarter for her bus fare.

There were biscuits and eggs in white sausage gravy with hash browns, big enough for them to split two plates three ways, for five dollars. But there was also a turkey bacon club sandwich that came with fries and slaw for a little more than seven dollars, and if they got water with that instead of sodas, and figured on a tip of a dollar, they would still have money left over. And there were the three eggs with hash browns and toast for three ninety-five-just enough that they could not afford it all around.

There was a bowl of chili for two ninety-five that seemed promising. You could get a side of fries for another two-fifty. Maybe if they got three orders of chili and one side of fries?

Thinking about what they could afford to eat was making his mouth water. If they did not figure out something soon, he was going to order it all and have no way home.

'Be right back,' Rallie said, and headed off toward the counter, leaving him alone at the table with Harper.

'Maybe you should go after her,' Noah said. 'Talk.'

'Maybe you should go after her,' Harper told him, pushing loose strands of wet hair behind her ears.

Noah sighed. 'Don't be like that.'

'Don't be like what?' She stared at him unblinkingly. 'Are you going to tell me why you answered all those questions and then lied about it? Why wouldn't you play even one more time?'

'That doesn't make any sense.' She folded her arms and balanced her chin on them, watching him. 'I couldn't,' Noah said.

'I know,' he said miserably. 'I thought it would be easier-'

He broke off as Rallie came back to the table, holding a bottle of ketchup and another bottle of spicy sauce. She opened her menu, scanning the prices.

'There are free refills on the sodas,' she said. 'We could get one and share it.'

'I asked about the bus, too,' Rallie said, not looking at any of them. 'Next one comes tomorrow, same time as today. I got directions to the stop. It is a couple of miles from here.'

'And be out a dollar seventy-five,' Noah said.

Harper was silent, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. The Princess's dark eyes shone in her mud-streaked face, and Noah could not help thinking that everything was going exactly the way she wanted it to, even if he had no proof of that.

Noah wondered if it was closer to where they had fallen into the river, whether they had gone the wrong way, whether they could have made it, but he did not ask.

Noah felt better, having eaten something since the donut. Harper and Rallie must have felt better too because they were able to agree on the chili and fries, which they devoured down to the last little burnt, ketchup-and-hot-sauce-covered crisp of fry.

They were still studying the menu when the waiter came back around to take their drink order (tap water) and placed a basket of bread and margarine on the table. They fell on it, ripping apart the rolls, spreading them with margarine, and stuffing them into their mouths.

'I'm so tired,' Rallie said, putting her head down on the table. 'All the walking and the swimming and the being cold and miserable. I could go to sleep right here. Seriously, under this table. It would be more comfortable than sleeping on the ground was.'

'I know,' Rallie said, groaning. 'I am stuck here, so I am in for finishing the quest. But are we seriously going to a cemetery at night and digging a grave?'

'We're almost done,' Harper said softly. 'We've almost made it.'

Noah looked out the window at the street. The sun was still in the sky, but it would not be for long. Rallie was right. By the time they figured out where they got there, it would be late.

'If we are going to go tonight, we need to get supplies,' said Noah. 'Something to dig with and a flashlight. All that stuff was in our backpacks, and now it is at the bottom of the Ohio River.'

Rallie inhaled sharply, and Noah followed her gaze. She was staring at the dollie. Its head was turned like it was looking out the window. Harper was looking in the same direction, mirroring the dolly's pose perfectly.

'Harper,' he said. 'Stop messing around.'

She turned back to look at them like she was oblivious. He had not seen her turn the Princess's head toward the window, but she must have. The dollie did not move on its own-had never left the case, needed them to bring it to the grave. It did not move. 'What...?'

Except for that time in the woods.

He hoped it did not move.

'You know where we are going, right? You know which cemetery we are going to, right?' He thought back to the moment before they got on the bus back home and how he had asked her the samphire thing. The grave is under a willow tree. Skylar will tell us the rest.

Rallie looked about to say something scathing.

Harper nodded, not looking at either of them. 'Yes.'

'You do, right?' Rallie asked.

'Of course,' Harper said, meeting their eyes, looking from Noah to Rallie. 'I just need a map.'

They paid the check with everything but the bus fare home, dumping the grimy pennies from the bottom of their pockets on the other coins and bills. The server smiled at them on the way out, and Noah smiled back, even though he knew they were completely broken.

Noah would have liked her to seem more confident, but then he would have liked her to stop being so crazy about the Princess and to stop acting like she might be occasionally possessed. Noah would have liked a lot of things.

'Hey,' Rallie said, reaching down past circulars and coupon flyers near the door to pick up a crude tourist map. It did not have any graveyards on it, but it did have the pottery museum, a few antique pottery stores, and the Carnegie Library. 'Is this any good?'

'The library,' Noah said. 'They will have detailed maps. We could use this to get there.'

They walked down a few blocks until the library came into view, its stately front looking out onto the water. It was domed on top, with red stone making up the body and carved white stone trim on the windows.

According to the tourist map, the library was not far. Now that she was a bit drier and had eaten something, Rallie seemed almost cheerful. He guessed that at this point there was no way she was not getting in trouble, so maybe she had just stopped worrying about it. She took the lead, Harper trailing behind Noah, holding the Princess as though the dollie had become very heavy.

'Who closes a library on the weekend?' Harper said, kicking one of the steps softly with the toe of her shoe.

It looked out of place, too grand for what surrounded it. It was also closed. It had been closed since one in the afternoon and was not due to open again until Monday morning.

Noah shrugged, then turned to see what Rallie thought. She was crouched near a basement window, pushing on the glass.

The window slid up a little way, and Rallie wedged her boot into the open space, scrambling to push it higher. It seemed stuck; the wood had swollen from temperature changes and had been unopened for years. 'What does it look like?' She spoke.

'What are you doing?' he whispered.

'Breaking into a government-owned building that we could get arrested for being inside of.'

'Well,' Harper said. 'Okay then.'

'Yes,' she said as the window slid up abruptly with a squeal. 'That's exactly what I'm doing.'

Rallie shimmied inside, hesitating once she was perched on the inner sill. The room was too shadowed for them to see what she was about to drop down onto.

'Rallie!' Harper yelped.

She jumped... There was a crash and a sound like something metal hitting the floor.

'Rallie,' Noah said warningly.

'Sh-h-h-h-h,' Rallie called back from the darkness, smugness filling her voice. 'See, I'm not so bad at quests after all.'

'That was amazing,' Noah said. 'Exactly what Girl Jann would do.'

'Well, come on then, Tommy sings.' Rallie's voice, from the dark, was eerily changed. It was like he was talking to Rallie and the character she played at the same time. For a moment he was not sure who made him. And at that moment he was not sure who he wanted to be either, but he was grinning like an idiot.

He glanced back at Harper. She looked crushed like she was on the outside of glass looking in at something she wanted desperately. For a moment he felt bad, but he was so happy to feel that way for long. It was fun to act like Tommesings with Rallie, and it was fun to sneak into a building in the middle of the day when even scary things were not that frightening. They were playing, and he could tell she knew that if she tried to play too, he would stop. 'Desk,' she said. 'Wait a second.'

'What did you land on?' He called to Rallie, moving to slide his legs through.

He heard rustling and something else tipping over, crashing and hitting the floor. Then the lights flickered to life, revealing a room filled with metal desks and filing cabinets, their surfaces covered in mounds of paper. Administrative storage area.

'Wow, what is all this stuff?' he asked, walking through space. Books were piled up next to lamps and old black-and-white photographs of the town in tidy black frames with engraved plates. Noah kicked the bizarre, jumping side of the desk that Rallie had hit; the paper was scattered around it, and one of its desk lamps was lying just above the floor, dangling from a cord. He landed near a tall filing cabinet, nearly stumbling into it as he tried not to lose his balance.

A bookshelf had been shoved against the back wall, and one of the shelves was filled with old pottery.

It was exhilarating to be somewhere they were not supposed to be. Like being on the boat. A real adventure, like Tommesings and Girl Jann, would have had.

'Hey! Take Skylar,' Harper called, holding out the dollie as she shimmied down through the window.

He did, putting the Princess on top of one of the cabinets. Lying on her side, the dolly's eyes watched Noah accusingly as he helped Harper down. As he did, a gust of chilly wind blew through the room, scattering papers.

'We're not going to be able to close that without a ladder,' Rallie said, pointing at the window.

'It's too high up.'

Noah bumped his arm against Rallie's as they followed her. 'I guess you're not going to loot the place, huh, Jann?'

'We won't be here long,' said Harper, picking up the Princess and walking toward the door. 'Let us wait and see what we find upstairs,' she told him, grinning, as they stepped into the darkened hall.

The basement of the library was warm and smelled like wood polish and old paper.

Plus, there was so much to see. They explored the conference room, the bathrooms, and two more storage rooms on the basement level. There was an exhibit of China vases behind glass, and the whole cabinet shook gently as they ran past. Noah inhaled deeply. He felt like he could relax for the first time since they had gotten on the bus.

They were not cold and exposed as they had been outside, and they were not in front of people who could get them in trouble, the way they had been in the donut shop and at the dinner or hanging on for their lives as they had been on the boat.

Then they jogged up the steps and saw the vaulted ceilings, iron railings, and marble of the main floor. According to a legend on the wall, Carnegie was a famous philanthropist who had been born super poor in a small Scottish town, made money in steel, and used it to build libraries on the East Coast, among other good-deed-type things. In the picture, he looked like an angry old man with a short beard.

He did not look like the kind of guy who liked stories, but Noah thought he must have had, to have built so many libraries.

'Hey,' Harper said, calling to him from the second floor, where there was a rotunda that looked down on the reference desk on the first floor. 'Come check this out!'

He grinned and ran for the stairs, quest forgotten.

There was something about being alone in an empty building. There was something about racing up the stairs and hanging over the balcony, your shout

bouncing off the walls. Noah, Harper, and Rallie dashed through the upstairs gallery, through the big rooms. And without ever saying so, they started playing. Not their old game, which was still contentious, although Rallie and Noah slipping into those characters on the way in made it easier to slip into new ones.

First Harper and Noah pretended to be monsters hiding in their library lair when Rallie as the monster hunter came in. When they got tired of that, they went behind the back of the reference desk and rifled through the drawers, finding-in addition to pens, pencils, a flash drive, and a bunch of rubber bands-a pair of blue hoop earrings, a mystery novel with the cover ripped off, and an eraser in the shape of a delete key. At the desk, Noah was even able to call the marina and leave the promised message about the boat while Harper looked on.

She chased them around for a while, trying to slay them, before they ganged up and chased her back, threatening to turn her into a monster too. They slid across the floor in their stocking feet, hiding behind stacks and riding on the book carts, shrieking as they went.

Rallie found a break room with a small kitchenette. There was a coffeepot, tea bags and sugar packets, and a refrigerator that contained five slightly wrinkly apples, a low-fat yogurt, a dry-looking hunk of cheddar, and a full package of Oreos. Four folding chairs surrounded a table covered in review copies of books that had not been released yet.

'Look at this!' Harper held up a book they would all be waiting for, one that was not due out for months.

'And no one's going to be in until Monday,' Noah said, sitting in one of the chairs and stretching out, dumping his damp jacket onto the table. 'We can sleep here tonight. We are going to be warm and dry, and it is going to be amazing.'

'We still have to go to the graveyard, remember?' Harper stood, all the giddy joy draining out of her. 'We can't get comfortable.'

Rallie snickered. He smiled up at the ceiling stupidly.

He sighed. It was true that he did not want to go out into the cold either. And now that the end of the quest was so close, some part of him did not want it to be over. He did not want to go out into the graveyard and find out there was not any magic. It seemed easier to goof around in the stacks and worry about burying the Princess in the morning.

And just like that, all the fun of running around the library was over. Rallie's mouth pressed into a thin, resentful line as Harper stalked off toward the main room. Their feud was back on.

Rallie looked after Harper, scowling.

Noah stood up, pacing the small room. 'You guys must make up. You are friends. You are supposed to be friends. You cannot just talk or talk in the weird not-talking way you've both been.'

Rallie shook her head. 'You do not understand. It is just-it is easy for Harper. She wants this one thing, and I better want it too. Either I am with her or against her, you know? And she is like that about everything.'

'I don't think it's easy for her,' Noah said.

Rallie sighed. 'If she wants to be friends, then she can say so. I get that the quest is important, but it seems like it is the only important thing.'

He found Harper at a long table, where she had spread out several maps, an atlas, and a guidebook. She was standing on a chair, looking down at all of it. The Princess was resting at one end, lying on her side, limp arms outstretched.

Noah sighed again and opened the door to the main room of the library.

'Did you find it?' Noah asked.

She turned with a start. She must not have heard him come in.

'Here,' she said, stepping onto the table and walking over to one of the maps, where she crouched down and pointed. 'Spring Grove Cemetery.'

'You're sure?' asked Rallie, and it was Noah's turn to be surprised. He had not expected that she would follow him.

'I didn't have an aerial view in my dreams, but it looks right,' Harper said. 'We should go tonight. There might be streetlights down there, and the moon is full. Even without a flashlight, I think we can find her grave. And then it is over. I promise.'

'I'll copy the map,' Harper said.

Rallie rolled her eyes.

'Okay,' said Noah. 'Get me when you're ready.' He picked up a book of local history that Harper must have pulled from the stacks and walked off toward a couple of couches he had spotted near the picture book section.

Flopping down, he flipped through the book, skimming over the section on local folklore. And there was a girl who got stood up on her wedding day and was found, weeks later, dead in her wedding gown. Legend had it that her bleached white skeleton ran around playing in traffic and grabbing people.

When Noah got bored, he slipped pieces of paper, on which he had written cryptic words, between the pages. There was not any mention of a Skylar Stella or a haunted dollie, but there was a story about a Dutch girl who haunted a canal lock and a creepy little boy who hung himself.

A little while later he heard the murmur of voices and hoped that meant that Harper and Rallie were making up. He thought that he would just close his eyes for a second.

They were going to be digging up a grave, and they were going to have to do it with scissors or sticks or whatever other tools they could find. THIS TIME HE dreamed that he was lying on a lawn, looking up at a big house. He could not get his legs to move. There was something wrong with his vision. It was darkening at the edges, but he could see enough to notice that there were shattered remains of porcelain dollies all around him.

It was going to be challenging work. But it was going to get done; Noah was sure about that. So, he needed to rest a little. He leaned back on the couch, turning his cheek against the crook of his arm.

And then he heard a voice, which he knew to be Skylar's father. 'She looks just like one of them. She looks just like a broken dollie.'

WHEN HE WOKE up, a woman he did not know was standing over him. She looked like she was about to scream, but he beat her to it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WOMAN BROUGHT HER THIN ARMS UP Defensively, as though his shouting was an attack. He scrambled up onto the couch and then over it, landing on the other side. She blinked owlishly behind her bright-green glasses. She was about his mother's age, with short, curly, bright-pink hair.

Above her, light streamed in from the windows. It was Sunday morning. He had slept through the whole night.

'Who are you?' Noah asked the woman.

Looking around, he spotted Harper and Rallie lying on the other couch, heads pillowled on opposite sides. They were both opening their eyes. Harper pushed herself up.

'I work here,' she said. 'I am a librarian. I came in at the weekend like I always do, I must place my orders for new books, and it is easier when there are not any patrons. Now, do you want to tell me what you three are doing here? And are you alone? I thought I heard something downstairs.' 'It's just us,' said Rallie, rubbing her face. 'We left the window open. You heard the wind.'

'Um,' Noah said, still dazed from sleep. Answers deserted him.

The librarian peered at the three of them more closely. 'You are lucky I did not immediately call the police. How old are you?'

She turned to Rallie and Harper. 'Where exactly do your parents think you are?'

His brain was finally catching up to what was going on, and he realized just how much trouble they were in. 'Twelve,' he said.

Rallie shrugged.

'Well, we are going to go into the office, and we are going to call them right now, okay? And you better not have vandalized this place, or I am going to change my mind and call the police officers.'

'We didn't mess up anything,' Harper said. 'Look around and see if we are telling the truth, and then if we are, you can let us go. We will not be any more trouble.'

Harper did not seem to be holding her, which was unusual. He thought about the last time he had woken up and found the Princess not where she had been the night before, but when he glanced around the library, nothing else seemed amiss. The couches had not been ripped; there was no scattered stuffing and no packages of food tossed from the break room.

Adrenaline spiked through Noah. He considered running. If they all sprinted for the doors, he was certain they would make it. Rallie's shoes were off, which was a problem, but she could grab them. And then there was the dollie.

'It's either we call your parents,' the pink-haired librarian said, 'or we call the police.'

'Come on in the back and I'll make you a cup of tea,' the pink-haired librarian said. 'You all look like you could use it.'

By that point, though, he had lost his chance. The librarian was waving them up off the couches, and he could not catch either girl's eye, so if he ran, he was not sure they would follow.

They must have seemed scruffy as they shuffled to the break room in the same clothes they had been wearing for a day and two nights. The cat ears on Rallie's hoodie were bent at odd angles, and there was ink smeared across Harper's cheek like one of the pens she had been using had started to bleed. Noah wondered if the librarian thought they were homeless kids. He wondered if telling her they would make her let them go.

'You don't know?' Noah asked. He looked around again, as though somehow the dollie was going to materialize out of the ether.

Halfway across the library floor, Harper stopped. 'Wait, where's the Princess?' Her voice was high-pitched, panicked.

'A dollie,' Noah said. 'She is old. Harper must have lost her.'

The librarian raised her eyebrows, as though waiting for an explanation.

'Well, where did you have her last?' Rallie asked Harper.

'Before that, she was on the map table,' Noah put in. 'Maybe you forgot-'

'I brought her with me when I went to the couch,' she said. 'I know I did. She was right there next to me when I went to sleep.'

'I saw the dollie,' Rallie interrupted, 'when we went to sleep. Someone must have gotten up and moved her.'

Harper started to go look when the librarian caught her arm.

'All of you,' she said with impressive firmness. 'You will go into the break room, and then we will deal with the missing dollie and your parents and everything else. The library is closed. If the dollie is here, we will find it. Meanwhile, it is not going anywhere. Now, let us go.'

Noah hoped the dollie was not going anywhere.

'I'm Jatherner Rausse,' she said. 'You may call me Miss Jatherner. Not Kathy, Jatherner.'

They sat down on folding chairs around the break-room table as the librarian put on the electric kettle. She looked through the cabinets until she found a package of Fig Newtons, which she ripped open and put in front of them.

'I'm Harper,' Harper said. 'Harper Bell. And this is Rallie Magnaye and Noah Ethan.'

Steam rose from each, along with the comforting smell of bruised leaves. 'We do not have milk, but I will put the sugar on the table. Now, I am going to call my director and inform her of what is going on. I am going to lock this door, but I will be right back, so if you need to use the bathroom or anything, I promise that I will take you as soon as I return.'

'Very melodic names,' said the librarian, pulling mugs out of a cupboard. The water had heated quickly, so she was able to take out tea bags, drop one in each mug, and fill them with boiling water.

She went out, leaving them alone, the click of the latch signaling that she was not kidding about locking them inside.

Noah had no idea how they were going to get out of the break room. No idea how they were going to find the Princess. No idea how they were going to do anything but go home in disgrace, their quest forever undone. The idea of stopping now, though, when they were so close, grated on Noah. It drove him nuts that if they had just gone to the graveyard last night-if he had just been less lazy- the quest might be over and done.

Harper peered at her mug. Then, abruptly, she wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

Rallie sighed. 'It is not your fault. I am the one who broke in.'

'And I'm the one who fell asleep,' Noah said. 'You are the one who kept reminding us, Harper. It is not your fault-'

Harper cut him off. 'That is not what I mean. I thought that we could do this thing, and when it was over, we would have something that no one else had an experience that would keep us together. 'You are going to be too busy thinking about boys and trying out for school plays and whatever to remember. It is like you are both forgetting everything. You are forgetting who you are. I

thought this would remind you. And I am sorry because it was stupid. I was stupid.' I can see you changing.' She turned to Noah. 'You are going to be one of those guys who hang out with their teammates and dates cheerleaders and do not remember what it was like to make up stuff. And you-' She whirled on Rallie.

'That's not fair,' Rallie said.

'Yeah, I didn't forget,' said Noah. Harper sounded just like his dad, except in reverse. He did not want to forget, and he wanted everyone to stop talking like it was inevitable, like it would happen whether he wanted it to or not.

Rallie rolled her eyes. 'We're not zombies just because we like the stuff you don't.'

'No, you're right,' Harper said, her voice speeding up and getting louder like she was afraid she was going to be cut off before she got it all out. 'It is not fair. We had a story, and our story was important. And I hate that both of you can just walk away and take part of my story with you and not even care. I hate that you can do what you are supposed to do, and I cannot. Noah and Rallie were quiet for a long moment.

I hate that you are going to leave me behind. I hate that everyone calls it growing up, but it seems like dying. It feels like each of you is being possessed and I am next.'

There was a long silence.

Before they could speak, the door opened, and Miss Jatherner came in. Her glasses were hanging around her neck from a chain, and she looked a little nervous. 'I am going to assume that means we're going with the original plan.' She nodded to herself, her pink curls bouncing as she did. 'Now, who wants to call home first?'

'Well,' she said, 'the director wants me to tell you that if there's something wrong at home, we can call social services instead of your parents.'

Rallie stood up, pushing her chair back. 'I will go. My grandmother's worried.'

'You sure?' Harper said. 'I can call first if you want.'

Rallie gave her a withering look. 'No, that is okay. Do not do me any favors.'

When they were gone, Noah drank his tea and ate five Fig Newtons, although they tasted like nothing in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed automatically.

'Are you mad at me?' Harper asked.

'How much trouble do you think she's going to get in?' Harper asked him.

'No,' Noah said. Then, after considering it a little more, 'Maybe.'

She slumped at the table and rested her head in a gesture that mirrored his. He thought about the way they would all be friends for so long that they even shared mannerisms. He thought about how they had met, years ago.

'Lots,' he said, putting his head down on his arms.

He thought about what Harper had said about growing up and losing themselves.

And how bad it would be if Rallie got in so much trouble that they could never see her again.

And how awful it would be if Rallie and Harper never made up.

He thought about what his mother and father were going to say when he called, and what he could say back.

He was still thinking about those things when the door opened and Rallie came back in, wearing shoes. She looked grim.

He thought about the stories, all the stories. The ones they had made up and the ones they never had.

'How was it?' Noah asked Rallie after a long moment. She had been fiddling with the electric kettle switch, turning it on and then off again, seeming lost in thought.

'Okay, Harper,' Miss Jatherner said. 'Your turn.'

Harper stood up and went out with only a single glance back.

'Oh,' she said. 'Weird... My aunt Linda was there. Grandma had called her. She had wanted to go out looking for me yesterday after I did not come back, but she knew she could not see very well at night. She was mad, but I do

not know, she sounded different. Like she realized she was old for the first time.'

'You think you're going to be grounded forever?' Noah asked.

He did not want to ever see Rallie again. Before he chickened out, he blurted out the words. 'So, if I asked you to go to the movies with me or something-'

'Oh, yes,' Rallie said. 'Forever and a day. Even if she lets Aunt Linda help more.'

She leaned against the counter, glancing over at him, a smile lifting one corner of her mouth. 'Are you asking me out?'

'Yes,' he said, wiping his hands off his jeans. His palms had started to sweat. 'Yes. Will you-'

'Yes,' she cut him off, saying the word very quickly, not looking at him. He wondered if she felt as awkward as he did. He was glad he asked, and he was glad she said yes, but he was also glad she was grounded, so it would not be happening soon.

The door opened, and they both jumped. Harper came in and threw herself into one of the folding chairs. She looked, if anything, even more upset than Rallie had.

'You, okay?' Noah asked.

'I need a ride,' Harper mumbled, putting her head in her hands again.

'What?' Rallie asked.

He stood and walked toward the door. As he was going out, he looked back at Harper. Rallie was standing behind her chair, hand on her shoulder. And at that moment he realized that he did not want them to have to go back, never having completed the quest. He wanted them to finish this thing the way Harper had imagined: together.

'I could not get my dad, and my mom's working until late. She asked if one of your folks could drive me.'

Miss Jatherner topped up her cup with more hot water. 'Noah, it's your turn.'

He watched as the librarian locked the breakroom door. Then he followed her through the library to an office on the third floor, where there was a small desk, piled with more review copies of books and papers, scattered with pens. A folding chair with a padded seat rested in front of it and a cloth chair on wheels behind it.

'Have a seat,' she said, sitting down behind the desk. She picked up the phone and handed it over to him. 'You dial the number, but I need to talk to your parents. I will tell them where you are, and then I will hand you the phone. I will go outside to give you some privacy unless you want me to stay here, okay?'

He nodded.

He reminded himself that he would not care if they were upset. He was still mad about what his dad had done and how little his mother had cared. If he kept that in the front of his thoughts, then nothing they could say would bother him. He just would not care.

The librarian took the receiver and started explaining how she had found Noah sleeping on the couch in the Carnegie Public Library in East Eaton-yes, East Eaton, Ohio-and yes, he was fine, he had two friends with him, and they were fine too. She gave the address of the library and some abbreviated directions.

Then she held out the phone to him.

He wiped his hands against his jeans and hoped it was true. He dialed and handed the phone over.

Noah took it and brought it slowly to his ear as Miss Jatherner went out the door, closing it softly behind her. 'Mom?' Noah said.

'It's me,' said his father. 'You all, right?'

Noah's heart sped. 'Yes, like she said. I am fine.'

'I never meant to make you feel like you had to run away,' Noah's dad said softly. As soon as his father picked up, Noah expected a lot of shouting and the phone getting slammed in its cradle. But his father did not sound angry. Noah was not sure why, but more than anything else, his dad sounded scared.

'That's not what I was doing,' he said. 'I was on a quest. I was going to come back to when I was finished.' Once Noah said the words, he knew they were true. He would have gone back. He had just needed a little break.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, as though his father was not sure how to respond. 'So, this quest,' he said finally, tentatively. 'Are you done with it now?'

'Not yet,' said Noah. 'I thought I was, but I don't think that I am.'

'We are going to get in the car, and we are going to be there in two and a half hours. Do you think you will be finished by then?'

'I don't know.'

'Your mother's been worried. You want to talk to her?'

Noah wanted to tell her that everything was okay, that he was fine, but he did not want to hear her voice and realize how much he had upset her. 'No,' he said after a moment. 'See you when you get here.'

His father gave a heavy sigh. 'You know I don't understand you.'

'You don't have to.' Noah just wanted the conversation over, before either of them said something awful.

'I want to,' his father said.

Noah snorted.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. 'I am not good at this kind of thing, but even though I do not always get things and your mother tells me I do not know how to talk, I wanted to tell you that I have been thinking about what I did with those toys ever since it happened. It was a mean thing to do. I grew up mean, and I do not want you to have to grow up mean too.'

Noah was silent. He had never heard his father talk that way before.

'When I saw you with those figures, I pictured you getting hassled at school. I thought you needed to be tougher. But I have been thinking that protecting somebody by hurting them before someone else gets the chance is not the kind of protection that anybody wants.'

'So, I'll see you soon,' his father told him. 'Good luck with the quest.' He said the word as though it was a strange, unfamiliar shape in his mouth, but he said it.

'Yes,' Noah said. It was all he could bring himself to say. He had no idea his father thought about anything like this. All the anger had drained out of him, leaving him feeling as fragile as one of those paper-thin China cups.

'Bye, Dad,' said Noah, and hung up the phone.

He sat there for a long moment, breathing hard. Something had shifted, something seismic, and he needed to be still long enough to have it settle inside of him. Then he stood up and went out the door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Noah looked under the sofa the girls had slept on and then under the one where he had fallen asleep-after all, the last time he had woken up, the dollie was resting right next to his head. He knelt with a shudder at the thought of her lying directly underneath where he had slept, as though she might reach up to her tiny porcelain hands and drag him down through the couch cushions. She was not there, though.

The Princess was not under the table, either. She was not in any of the chairs, nor anywhere obvious on the rug. She was not anywhere he could see.

MISS JATHERNER WAS SHELVING A FEW BOOKS NEARBY and putting them back on the cart when he emerged from the office. Her pink hair was as bright as the synthetic mane of a plastic horse.

'Everything okay?' She asked him.

'They're coming,' Noah said, trying to put the strangeness of his father's words behind him. 'Did you see Harper's dollie?'

She shook her head. 'I walked by the table where you left all those maps, but there was nothing else there. Do you want to look at yourself?'

Noah nodded and followed her to the couches. He noticed her shoes for the first time, bright yellow with bows. She did not look like any librarian he had ever seen before. She did not look like an adult he had met before.

He did not feel her either, did not sense the gaze of her dull eyes watching him from some corner of the room, the way he had when she was in the cabinet in Harper's living room.

While he searched, Miss Jatherner started gathering up the books and maps Harper had left on the table the night before.

'What was it that your kids were trying to find?' the librarian asked, frowning at him. He could tell that Miss Jatherner did not know what to make of the story about the dollie. He was not sure that she even believed there was a dollie. If not, he wondered what she thought he was looking for.

He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'It looks like someone was researching a cemetery near here,' said Miss Jatherner gently. 'Spring Grove? I saw a few pieces of copy paper with directions drawn on them and scratched out. What is in Spring Grove Cemetery? You can tell me, Noah. I promise that I will try to understand.'

That felt a little too real, there is a potter with a grisly story.

'Downstairs?' Noah took a few steps across the library floor before Miss Jatherner cleared her throat.

'I don't think so,' Miss Jatherner said. 'I let you look around, but enough is-a enough. Come on.'

'Have you ever heard a story, a ghost story, about a girl who jumped off her roof?' He hesitated, pressing the front of his sneakers against one of the legs of the table. He wanted to trust her, but he knew he could not trust her too much-she had never believed him if he told her everything. 'Like under mysterious circumstances? One named Skylar Stella.'

Miss Jatherner shook her head. 'The only Stella I can think of was a fancy worker-a very well-known potter locally. We even have a display of his work downstairs, courtesy of the museum. There was a grisly story about him, but I do not know about any Skylar Stella.'

Noah remembered the wall of fragile-looking vases he had seen in the basement. He had run past them, not looking at them, and now he was itching to know what he had missed. He had to get down there. He had to. His heart started to pound with renewed hope. There was a secret there-a secret that might not help them to finish the quest but would prove that it was a real one. A real quest for a real ghost.

He concentrated on that as the librarian led him back to the break room and opened the door with the key sticking out of the lock. Inside, the girls were sitting at opposite ends of the table wearing near-identical expressions of worry.

'I am going to call the director back,' Miss Jatherner said, with a bright smile that might have been forced. 'Let her know that everything has been resolved. Then we will figure out some lunch for your kids. It is noon.'

'Thank you,' Rallie said quietly.

'Thank you,' Harper and Noah echoed automatically.

The librarian went out, and Noah waited until he heard the turn of the key in the lock. Then he put both his hands' palms down on the table like he was going to give a speech.

'Okay,' he said, looking from one friend to the other. 'We need a plan. We need to break out of this room before the librarian comes back.'

Rallie stood up, looking a little confused, but hopeful. 'How?'

'It doesn't matter,' Harper said, staying seated. 'We do not have the Princess anymore. Even if we get out of here and I have no idea how we could do that we cannot finish the quest without her.'

'We'll find her,' said Noah. 'I looked around where we were sleeping, and she was not there, but that does not mean anything. We can find her. We can do this. Are you sure you did not bring her with you anywhere else? Anywhere?'

Harper shook her head. It seemed to Noah that giving them that speech about all the stuff she hated had drained away from the part of her that had driven her this far. Or it was losing the Princess. Either way, Harper looked more defeated than he had ever seen her. 'No. When I sat down on the couch, she was with me. I was worried about rolling over on her since she is so fragile, so I put her on the floor and hung my hand down to keep touching her. I would have known if someone moved her.'

'Creepy,' Rallie said. 'What is it with you and the Princess? You are always holding her and touching her. Don't you find the whole she-was-made-from-human-bones thing even a little bit, like, scary?'

Harper gave her a look.

'I don't mean it like that,' said Rallie. 'Not like you are being weird. Are you sure she is not doing something for you? Making you act like what she wants?'

'Oh, so now you believe in the possibility of a ghost,' Harper sneered.

He leaned against the wall, folding his arms, and trying to concentrate. They could tell Miss Jatherner they had to go to use the bathroom all of them at the same time and then sneak out the window. The only problem was that Miss Jatherner would not let them all use the bathroom at once. Well, that and the fact that the windows in the basement were far up the wall; they had had to drop down during the climb in. And just one more problem—he was not sure there was a window in the girls' bathroom.

'We'll find the Princess,' Noah insisted, interrupting before they started fighting again. 'Just as soon as we figured a way out of this room. Which we will. In just a second an idea is going to come to me, and it is going to be a good one.'

Rallie stared up at the ceiling. Then she stepped onto one of the folding chairs, and from there onto the table.

'What are you doing?' Harper asked.

Rallie went up on her toes and shoved at one of the ceiling tiles. It moved over, showing the metal grid that suspended it. Beyond was only darkness, like the gap left by a missing tooth. 'I have an idea,' she said. 'Look at how low the ceiling is in here. And look at the door—it is different from the others; the knob is shiny.'

'So?' Noah said, walking over and frowning at what she was doing.

'Everything else in the building is old, but here everything is new. This was built recently. I bet the drop ceiling hides an older, high ceiling, and there might be some venting or something to crawl through in the new wall.'

'You're going to go up there?' Noah asked.

'Brace the table and I will,' Rallie said. 'It'll be just like climbing the monkey bars on the playground back in elementary.'

Noah stared at her in awed amazement. 'Do you even think this will work?' He asked.

She looked back at him. 'It works in the movies.' She jumped, caught the metal supports, and pulled herself up into the dark as though she was in gym class.

'Even if you get to the other side,' called Harper, 'the doors are still locked.'

Noah started grinning. 'No. Miss Jatherner leaves the key in it. If she can get to the other side, she really can open the door. We are getting out of here.'

'Ow,' Rallie said from above them, muffled by the tiles still in place. 'I can't see the vent.'

'Maybe there isn't one,' Harper said. 'Come back down.'

They heard a metallic clang and a sharp yelp, then more clanging. Noah hoped that Miss Jatherner's office was soundproof. Then the clanging stopped and there was a solid sound, like a body hitting the floor.

Harper looked at Noah, a wild hope in her eyes. He grinned at her.

Then the door opened, Rallie standing on the other side and breathing heavily. 'Come on,' she said. 'Quick.'

'Okay,' said Noah. 'Here is the plan. We all go look for the Princess. I will take the basement. Harper, you retrace your steps. Rallie, you take the stacks on this level. We all meet up on the side of the library-the one that is close to the street. Okay?'

'What if we don't find her?' Rallie asked.

'We have to find her,' Harper said.

'Since we're split up, we're not going to know who finds what, so we just have to cover as much ground as we can and then meet up.' Miss Jatherner might be back soon. She could have gone out for the promised lunch, but that still did not give them much extra time. They had to be quick. 'See you guys in ten.'

Harper nodded and started toward the couches. Rallie saluted and headed for the stacks.

Noah walked down the stairs to the basement. He felt a little bit guilty knowing he had a reason for deciding to look for the Princess in the basement-a reason that only had to do with finding her. He wanted to read about the Stella guy who had made the pottery. He wanted to know if he was some relative of Skylar's.

Suddenly the cabinet sprang to bright life. The pieces inside were made of some porcelain so thin that it was translucent and shaped into the most fantastical forms. There were teapots corded with garlands of tiny perfect flowers; egg cups shaped with a filigree netting in the quatrefoil pattern of old

church windows, all of it in shining gold, and vases with intricately shaped arms, their bodies painted with a delicate pattern of cherry blossoms. All the pieces seemed to glow from within, so thin, and the fine was the bone China from which they were made.

The basement was quiet, the only sound coming from the wind blowing through the window they had left open. It was dark in the hallway, and he could see why he had not noticed the display: the lights in the case were off. He fell along the wall until he found the switch and flicked it.

They were just like the pieces in Noah's dream of Skylar, except that these were perfect.

Despite the successes of American potteries in East Eaton at the turn of the century, they have still considered no match for their European cousins. Patriotism and ambition pushed Wilkinson Clark China to make something unique, new porcelain was so fine that it would secure the place of their company as not just equal to but better than any the world over. They wanted to make art.

And there was a plaque in the center with a black-and-white picture of a stern-looking man standing near the river. It read:

Orchid Ware was the result of a collaboration between two men: Philip Dowling and Lukas Stella. Dowling was a pottery technician and a specialist in clay chemistry. He had considerable experience and was able to produce the process that allowed Wilkinson-Clark to create porcelain that was very thin but also possessed sufficient structural integrity for commercial production. Part of what made the porcelain so solid was the high percentage of bone ash from cattle bones that were de-gelatinized and then calcined at extremely hot temperatures.

Stella was an artist. Rumored to be difficult to work with and often found shouting at underlings or accusing them of spying on him, he was also a genius, able to coax beauty from clay. His steady hand, wild imagination, and myriad influences—Art of Nouveau, Moorish, Persian, and Indian, as well as the English and German pottery of his childhood—helped, make Orchid Ware objects that were different and altogether finer than any porcelain produced in East Eaton before. Stella became obsessive, working around the clock and refusing to allow the sale of any piece that was less than perfect.

Orchid Ware took off immediately. Highlighted at the World's Fair in Chicago, it won numerous awards and stunned the international ceramics community. Immediately there was a demand among the discerning ladies of the day. Even the First Girl commissioned a piece. But despite the flood of orders, Orchid Ware turned out not to be profitable to produce. Each piece took too much time to complete, and many were destroyed in kilns built to fire much sturdier ceramics. Others broke during shipping. For every piece that survived, fifteen were either broken or deemed too imperfect to be salable. But despite the drain, Orchid Ware was on the company's finances, Wilkinson-Clark's pride forced them to continue producing it, even at a loss.

Then tragedy struck. Lukas Stella's daughter went missing in the early autumn of 1895. Quickly, though, sympathy turned to terror when blood and hair were discovered in his office in the factory and on leather, apron belonging to him. It was hypothesized that he had murdered his daughter and used the method of calcinating cattle bone to dispose of her body. This was backed up by the accounts of his late wife's sister, who had been a caretaker to the daughter, and who reported Lukas Stella coming home in an unhinged state of mind and locking her in one of the rooms in their large Victorian home. When she escaped from the room, he and his daughter were already missing.

Lukas Stella denied murdering his daughter but did not explain the evidence found in his workspace, nor an account of his daughter's whereabouts, saying only, 'I am not her killer, but I am the one who has given her new life.' Further questioning caused him to break down, screaming, weeping, and insisting that his daughter 'was like an angel who fell to Earth and was 'his most perfect creation.' He was convicted of murder and sentenced to execution.

After his conviction, the production of Orchid Ware ceased. All told, pieces were made in less than three years, but are still avidly collected today and are unbelievably valuable. Every few years rumors surface of fantastical pieces made by Lukas Stella at the height of his madness- samovars, a working porcelain clock, and even a jointed dollie-although given the fragile nature of Orchid Ware, these rumors are unlikely to prove true. Still, the mystique of Orchid Ware persists and will persist for many years to come.

This collection is on loan from a private collector.

Noah stared at the plaque. He read it again to be sure he understood it, his dream echoing in his ears. If what he and Harper had dreamed was true, if Skylar was real, then Lukas Stella did not kill his daughter. Her aunt must have caused Skylar to fall off the roof, and Lukas- who, murderer or not, was super

crazy-must have found her body and decided that the only fitting tribute was to turn her into a dollie made from his precious Orchid Ware.

A shudder ran through him. It felt like electricity sparking over his skin.

Upstairs, he heard a sound like someone calling out-calling a name. Miss Jatherner must be in the library looking for them. Noah did not have any more time to worry about Lukas Stella. He had to find the dollie. He had to find Skylar.

Quickly he walked into the first room they had come into through the window. It was carpeted in brown paper, making the floor seem covered in fallen snow. There were no dollie, though. Not on any of the filing cabinets or the bookshelf on the far end or underneath the desks.

Crossing the hall, he went into another room, this one piled with boxes of books. He peered into each, but there was no sign of the Princess.

Then, not sure where else to look, he ducked into the girls' bathroom. He had never been in the girls' room before, and something was embarrassing about it. He did not want to get caught there. Looking around, though, it was not that different from a boys' bathroom. The tile was pink, and there were no urinals on the wall, just a row of three stalls and a single sink-but otherwise, it was identical. He walked toward the sinks and the mirror without much hope until he noticed the metal trash can resting against one wall.

The Princess was there, lying inside the trash can, on a bed of wadded-up paper towels, her odd eyes staring up at Noah. He took a sudden, startled step back and met his gaze in the mirror.

But even that was strange. Instead of his regular skin, he saw a face made from cracked white China with black holes where the eyes should have been. And when he opened his mouth to scream, his reflection stayed perfectly serene, lips motionless on what seemed like a mask.

Then he blinked and he looked at his face. Everything was normal, except that his heart was hammering against his chest.

He told himself that Harper had gotten up in the middle of the night and come down to use the bathroom. She had been half-asleep and had left the Princess on the sink and the dollie had fallen into the trash. It was a weird explanation, but he was going to assume that was what had happened. Otherwise, he was going to have to accept that she had lured him to the

basement, so he had read her story. Later he would be okay with thinking about that, like once he was out in the sunshine again.

He was also going to assume that he had freaked himself out and that is why he had thought he saw something in the mirror-something that was not there.

Noah leaned down and carefully took the Princess out of the trash. Holding her to his chest, he started to run out the door and up the stairs, hitting the front door of the library with his shoulder and plunging out into the cold autumn day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RALLIE WAS ALREADY WAITING ON THE SIDE OF THE library, squatted down and half-hidden behind a bush. She was about to say something when she spotted the Princess in his arms and jumped up.

'You did it,' she said in a half-whisper. 'You found her!'

He nodded vigorously. 'Where's Harper?'

They pelted down the street, racing through winding roads that led to Main. After a few blocks, Noah paused, panting. When he looked back over his shoulder, he did not see Miss Jatherner anymore. He was not sure the librarian's bright-yellow shoes with the bows were the kind that you could run in.

But just as the words came out of his mouth, Harper rounded the corner of the building, running toward them. He caught a glimpse of pink hair behind her. 'Go!' she shouted. 'Go! Go!'

'We made it,' Noah said.

'You found the Princess.' Harper smiled at him. She had not smiled like that since before he had lied to her about Tommy's songs, since before they started the quest.

He felt the same elation he had aboard the little Sunfish: the certainty that they were going to make it and the pleasure that came from solving a problem that had only minutes before seemed insurmountable. Only now, looking back, did he realize how truly crazy their middle-of-the-night plan to find Skylar Stella's grave had been. But here they were, within minutes of the cemetery. They might turn out to be the kind of people who finished quests.

He found himself grinning back. 'I found something else, too. About her story. I know what she wanted us to find out.'

'Not now,' said Rallie, shaking her head. 'We must keep moving. For all we know, the librarian might be calling the police officers.'

'Do you still have the directions to the cemetery?' Noah asked Harper.

Harper nodded. 'But we are not going to make it there on foot. Unless-' Then she took off again, racing up Main Street.

They ran after her. She stopped in front of the gaming store, where a few bikes rested, some chained to a nearby pole and two leaned against a wall. She eyed them speculatively.

'You can't be serious,' Noah said. 'We're just going to-' picked one up and started to walk with it toward Rallie. 'You pedal,' Harper told her. 'I will get on the handlebars. And I will tell you where to go.'

Rallie nodded, throwing her leg over the bike, and steadyng it.

'No worse than taking the boat,' Harper said, climbing up onto the front of the bike. 'We will bring them back. If we are fast enough, whoever they belonged to will not even have finished their game yet.'

Shaking his head, he grabbed the other unlocked bike. Shoving the Princess inside his sweatshirt, and with one arm holding the old, creepy dollie in place, he mounted the seat and pedaled off after Harper. They whizzed down the street, hair blowing behind them, his legs pumping harder and harder as they sped on.

'This way,' Harper shouted against the wind, a flimsy piece of paper blowing in one hand, the other arm extended to indicate an upcoming left turn.

At that thought, he felt something move inside his shirt.

Noah's bike wobbled, and he nearly crashed. He skidded to a halt instead, breathing raggedly. Rallie zoomed ahead, down the street.

'Stop it,' he told the Princess firmly, not caring if he sounded like a lunatic. 'I get that you are excited. I get that we are close to the end. And I even get that you like to freak me out. But I do not have my bike helmet, and you are made of some super-thin Orchid Ware, so if we crash, we are both going to break. Okay?'

The dollie did not move, which did not mean anything since the squirming might just have been his imagination. He pushed off the road and started to pedal again just as Rallie and Harper rode onto the lawn of the Spring Grove Cemetery.

He followed them, dismounting, and dropping his bike beside theirs on the soft grass near the entrance, wheels still spinning. The graveyard was a tidy meadow of trimmed hedges and orderly stones. They spread out over the hill that ran up against a wooded area. A path of white gravel veered along the side, barely wide enough for a car.

'Okay,' Rallie said. 'Now what?'

'We look for a willow tree,' said Harper. 'You know, one of the ones with the long branches and the leaves that hang down.'

Harper nodded. 'I think so, but regular willows have leaves that hang down too, just not as far.'

'A weeping willow?' Noah put it in.

'Okay,' Rallie said. 'Depressed-looking trees. Got it. If it seems droopy and miserable at all, I am calling you to confirm its willowy status.'

Noah unzipped his sweatshirt and glanced toward Harper. 'Hey. You want to go back to carrying Skylar?' Smirked... 'How come? Does she make you nervous?'

Harper put out her hands. 'I do, coward.'

Noah shrugged. 'I just thought that you would want her since you brought her all this way. But if you do not-'

He handed over the Princess with great relief. Now when he looked at her, he could not help but believe she was made from the bones of a dead girl. It made touching her shuddersome. He did not care if Harper teased him. He did not want to carry the dollie through the cemetery surrounded by dead people.

Noah forced a laugh as they walked through the quiet graveyard, past flowerpots, and wreaths, past statues of fallen soldiers and memorial benches, and a large expanse of grass dotted with bronze grave markers. They passed fat oak trees, a smallish collection of pine trees, and something that Noah thought might be a locust tree, but which was not a willow.

'Yell if you see anything,' said Rallie. 'Like willow trees... or zombies.'

'I don't see the tree,' Rallie said finally. 'Are you sure this is the right graveyard?'

'We're missing it somehow,' said Harper nervously. She could not keep still, running ahead of them and then back again. 'We must be. The grave is supposed to be under a willow tree.'

They kept walking, crossing the same ground, staring at the same trees.

'Maybe we should just look for the name for Stella,' Noah said. He wanted to tell them about the plaque in the library, but he was not sure how much time they had, after all, Miss Jatherner had seen the maps of the cemetery.

'It's not here,' Harper said finally, her voice exceedingly small. 'I thought-after you found Skylar back at the library-I thought that the grave was going to be here. I thought it was going to work.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I could be wrong about that. I could be wrong about everything.'

Noah flopped down on the grass in front of a large memorial. He had thought the same thing. 'Could you be wrong about the graveyard? I mean, could there be a different one in East Eaton?'

'What do you mean?' Rallie asked, hopping up to sit on a granite headstone and folding her legs under her. 'Do not give up. We are so close.'

For a moment they were quiet. It felt like the Earth had tilted on its axis, for Harper to say that. She had been the reason they had come all this way, the reason they had slept in the woods, sailed a boat down the Ohio River and escaped from a library. She had been the one who believed, no matter what. Noah had never imagined she had any doubts.

...Remained standing, pacing back and forth on the grass. 'Maybe I made it all up. All the stuff I said. I dreamt about her. But the rest... I do not know. It felt true when I said it. But I wanted it to be true so much that I convinced myself it was.'

Fury rose in him, terrible and formless. It wanted to come home and find his figures gone all over again-as if something had been snatched away and he could not get it back.

Rallie took a quick breath like she was swallowing her need to scream 'I knew it!' at the top of her lungs.

No magic... Just a story.

But he had dreamed about Skylar, and he had seen the plaque on the wall of the library. He had felt her move and he had seen her bones.

So, Harper was just like Rallie and him, doubting herself sometimes. All that meant was that she did not know everything.

'Look, the ghost is real,' Noah said.

'Maybe I just tricked you,' said Harper miserably.

It just figured that Harper would be as stubborn about being talked back into believing something as she was about being talked out of believing things. 'What about the guy on the bus and the donut man both saying something about there being a blond girl with us? And even the Girl at the diner asked if we wanted seats for four. What about that?'

Harper folded her arms. 'The first guy was crazy. The second guy was kidding. And the dinner thing was a coincidence.'

'What about the camp getting trashed?' Rallie asked.

'You never thought that was because of the ghost,' said Harper. 'You never believed in Skylar, Rallie, so don't try to pretend.'

'Did you, do it?' Rallie asked her. 'I didn't believe it because I thought maybe it was you.'

'No!' Harper looked genuinely shocked.

'Well, then,' said Rallie. 'Look, I didn't want to believe it, but I have to admit that a lot of weird things have happened, and you have to admit it too.'

Noah took a deep breath. 'Remember when I said I found something back at the library? It was an exhibition of pottery-of the pottery that Lukas Stella made-and there was information on his life. He murdered his daughter, but they never found the body.'

That cannot be a coincidence. He must have been her father. And I think the secret that Skylar wanted us to discover was that it was her aunt who killed her-the woman in the dream who chased her around the roof with a broom.

She fell to her death, and her father took her body and made it into a dollie because he was a head case. But he did not kill her, even though everyone thought he did. And the whole thing proves that you are right. That your dreams are real.'

Harper looked at him skeptically. 'Maybe I read the story before-maybe I read about it and then forgot it, so I made up a different version of what happened.'

'Oh, come on,' Rallie said. 'That's ridiculous.'

Noah shook his head. 'I had a dream, too, that night in the woods. About Skylar. It was... like yours. Rallie, tell her.'

'Okay,' Harper said. 'Maybe Noah is lying to make me feel better.'

'You had a dream?' Harper's incredulity stung. He remembered how many times he had spoken to her in that tone of voice since they had started this journey and was suddenly deeply sorry. 'How come this is the first time you are mentioning it to me? And anyway, if they could not find her body, would she even have a grave? There is nothing to find.'

'Fine,' Noah said, running his fingers through his hair. 'What do you want me to say? We cannot find the weeping willow. I do not know what to do either.'

Rallie slid off the stone and hugged Harper around the waist, resting her chin against Harper's shoulder. 'It is okay. It was still an adventure, right? Our last game.'

The words went through Noah like water. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. 'There is something I must tell you. Before we go back. I might as well say it now, while Harper is already mad at me.'

Harper and Rallie looked down at him, something in his tone signaling that whatever it was would be important. They watched him as if he were a snake, rearing back to strike.

'When I said that I didn't want to play anymore-' He stopped, not sure he could go on. 'It was not true exactly. My dad threw out all my- He threw out everything. All of them. Tommy sings and Tristan and Max. Everybody. So, it is not so much that I do not want to play. I cannot.'

There was a long silence. 'Why didn't you tell us?' Rallie asked finally.

'I could not. I could not, because if I did, then-' He stood up, wiping his eyes. 'Look, I am sorry I did not tell you. And I am sorry I did not tell you about the dream. I do not know why I did not.'

Harper just stared at him; her eyes as hard as the Princesses'.

'Okay,' he said, taking a few steps back. Tears were burning in his eyes already, and he was suddenly sure there was no way they would understand. He felt stupid for telling them. He felt stupid for crying. If only he had kept his mouth shut, everything would have been fine. 'How about we all make one more sweep? We can meet back here in a couple of minutes.'

'Noah,' Harper said. 'Wait-'

He did not want to hear how the quest was all his fault, how she would have never taken the Princess out of the case if it was not for his lie; he already knew. He staggered off before she could finish, long legs carrying him over the uneven ground. He passed rows and rows of marble stones, heading deeper into the old part of the cemetery, where the markers were chipped and weathered. There he flopped down in the grass and let himself cry in big, heaving sobs.

Saying the words out loud-saying what he had been avoiding this whole time, that Tommesings and the rest of them were gone forever, that the game had been taken away from him, that he still wanted to play but couldn't-hurt. It ripped away from the fog of numbness and even though it hurt, for the first time since he had lost his figures, he was ready to let go.

He was not sure how much time had passed when he finally stopped crying. It was a beautiful day-crisp, the way early falls days can be warm but have an occasional chill wind. The sky overhead was as Jon as spilled ink from a pen. Leaves shivered above him.

He leaned back and watched the clouds blow across his vision.

'Hey!' He heard Rallie shout. 'He's here.'

'We were worried,' Harper said, standing over him and looking down. 'We thought you would come back after a minute, and then we thought you would come back after ten minutes, but you didn't.'

'I've been a jerk,' Noah said. 'I know. We've all been mad at each other, and I know a lot of it is because of what a jerk I have been.'

Harper sat down next to him. 'You should have just told us.'

'I know,' he said. 'Are you mad?'

Harper nodded. 'Of course, I am mad! But I am less mad than when I thought you did not care about any of it.'

He looked over at Rallie. She was staring at one of the stones as if she did not want to look at him. 'What about you, Rallie-?'

'Get up,' she said suddenly. 'Get up! Get up! Look!'

Harper jumped up and hauled Noah to his feet.

Rallie was pointing to a stone he had been lying in front of on the grass. 'You found it! Noah, you found it.'

The large marble headstone bore the word STELLA on it, and over that, a carving of a willow tree. They stared at it, incredulous smiles giving way to genuine grins and laughter.

It made him feel, for a moment, like no stories were lies. Not Kanth Jones's stories about aliens. Not Dad's stories about things getting better or things getting worse. Not Harper's stories about the Princess. All stories were true ones.

Harper knelt, pushed aside some weeds, and traced smaller words at the base. 'There are names here-it is a family plot. That is why the stone is so big. There's Lukas. And someone named Hedda-that must be Skylar's mother. And look-a blank spot. An empty place for Skylar.'

'We did it,' Rallie said, her voice soft as any prayer. 'The quest is complete.'

'We have to give her a good funeral,' said Noah. 'We came all this way. We must do it right.'

Rallie and Harper nodded.

Rallie's job was to find flowers. She did not want to take them from other graves, so she picked some toad lilies, goldenrod, and turtlehead that grew in the woods at the edge of the cemetery. She braided all the stems together to make a garland for the Princess and then made another little bouquet to leave behind once they were done.

And so, they decided that Noah would dig the grave, which he did mostly with his hands, but also with the assistance of several sticks and a long,

flat piece of slate that was sharp enough on one end to cut through roots. It took some time, but he was able to hollow out a space big enough for the dollie to rest comfortably.

Harper's job was to prepare the dollie for burial. She rubbed the dirt off the porcelain with spit and the cleanest edge of her T-shirt. Then she took off her hoodie and wrapped Skylar in it like it was a shroud.

Harper placed the dollie in the hole in the ground and smoothed the hairs around her face. One of the doll's eyes was open, staring up at them, but the other was closed. Harper cleared her throat.

Finally, they were ready.

'Skylar,' Noah said. The words came easily, the way they did when he was playing, but he felt entirely like himself. 'You must be one determined ghost to get us to come all this way. I know we did not always do the best job, so thanks for not quitting on us. I am glad you chose us to be your champions.'

'Skylar,' she said, 'we think that you were about our age when you died and that no one knows your true story, only that something terrible happened. We are going to keep trying to discover the truth for you. We hope you can rest easy now. You are home with your family.'

'Skylar,' Rallie said softly, stepping forward. 'I only ever knew you as our Princess, so that is how I am going to talk to you. We, your loyal subjects, quested far to bring you to this place and have gathered here this day to bid you farewell on your journey. I am glad you are finally free from your tower.'

She leaned down to place the garland around the doll's neck. Pink petals fell on the Princess's dress and hair.

'The Princess is dead,' she said. 'Long live the Princess.'

They clasped hands, and then Harper knelt to begin covering Skylar with dirt. The first handfuls covered her face, leaving her fingers, her cheeks, and her forehead bare. More earth fell until she was covered completely.

'Good-bye, Skylar,' Harper whispered as Rallie set the bouquet she had made on top of the soft, new-turned earth. A few petals fell, dusting it gold.

Noah felt the wind rise, like the wind he had heard singing through the trees the night he had run home from basketball practice. He felt the same chill at his neck, and he shivered, but this time he did not run. He let it pass over him,

racing on and upward. And he thought he heard, very distantly, the sound of a girl laughing.

Smiling, Noah looked out at the lines of graves as they turned to walk back to the road.

Rallie kept pace with him. 'I keep thinking about what Harper said, about us all changing. We are, aren't we?'

Harper shivered in her T-shirt. 'You guys are.'

Noah wrapped an arm around her shoulders. 'You're cold because you gave your jacket to a ghost, and you don't think anything's different about you?'

Harper snorted, but she did not pull away. 'That is not what she means. I am simply different, like weird. We had this adventure together, but now we are going to go back. And I will be the same, but you guys will keep changing.'

'Quests are supposed to change us,' Noah said.

'How about real life?' asked Harper.

Rallie picked up a blade of grass and folded it in her fingers. 'What is that? Seriously. This was real. This was a story that we lived in. We can live other stories too.'

In the distance, Noah saw two cars pull into the graveyard. He recognized Rallie's aunt's blue Toyota, with his mom's beat-up green Nissan behind it. As they drew closer, he saw the shadow of his father in the passenger seat.

'This was our last game,' Harper said. 'This is the end of our last game.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Noah. 'With the Princess gone, the kingdoms are going to be in turmoil. Lots of people want her throne, all of them willing to manipulate, scheme, and battle to get it. And with Tommesings and so many other hero's dead, it is going to be a different world. A world in chaos. We cannot play it the way we used to, but we could still tell each other what happens next.'

'Chaos, huh?' asked Rallie, a slow grin spreading across her face. 'Sounds like fun.' she asked.

Harper smiled a familiar scheming smile, her eyes alight with new hope. 'You want to play?'

A memoir from the trunk years later...

'It all ended by me become the Dollie, looked like she was inside it I found a new body, to linger inside...'

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 26

1st Base

So-o...

'Please; please don't say anything to Margot about it.'

He nods, but that is not good enough. I need a verbal commitment. I need to hear the words come out of his mouth. So, I add; 'Do you swear? In your life?' If Margot were to ever find out - I would want to die.

'All right; I swear. I mean; we have not even spoken since she left.'

I let out a huge breath. 'Great. Thanks.' I am about to walk away; but then Josh stops me.

'Who's the guy?'

'What guy?'

'The guy you're dating.'

That is when I see him. Marcel Kavinsky; walking down the hallway. Like magic.

Beautiful; dark-haired Marcel. He deserves background music; he looks so good. 'Marcel.'

Kavinsky. Marcel Kavinsky! The bell rings, and I sail past Josh. 'I must go! Talk later, Josh!'

'Wait!' He calls out.

I ran up to Marcel and launched myself into his arms like a shot out of a cannon. I have my arms around his neck and my legs hooked around his waist, and I do not even know how my body knows how, because I've for sure never touched a boy like this in my life.

It is like we are in a movie and the music is swelling and waves are crashing around us.

Except for the fact that Marcel's expression is registering pure shock and disbelief and a drop of amusement because Marcel likes to be amused. Raising his eyebrows; he says, 'Lara Jean? What the... Hell?'

I did not answer. I just kissed him.

My first thought is- I have a muscle memory of his lips.

My second thought is- I hope Josh is watching. He must be watching, or it is all for nothing.

My heart is beating so fast that I forget to be afraid of doing it wrong. Because for about three seconds; he kisses me back. Marcel Kavinsky; the boy of every girl's dream, is kissing me back.

I have not kissed that many boys before. Marcel Kavinsky; John Ambrose McLaren; Allie Feldman's cousin with the weird eye, and now Marcel again.

I open my eyes and Marcel's staring at me with that same expression on his face. Very sincerely I say, 'Thank you.' He replies, 'You're welcome;' and I hop out of his arms and sprint off in the opposite direction.

It takes all the history classes and most of English for my heart rate to slow down. I kissed Marcel Kavinsky. In the hallway; in front of everybody. In front of Josh.

I did not think this thing through. That is what Margot would say, including and especially the 'obviously.' If I had thought, it was through; I would have made up a boyfriend and not picked an actual person. More specifically, I would not have picked Marcel. He is the worst person I could have picked because everybody knows him. He's Marcel -; for Pete's sake. - of Gen and-.

It does not matter that they are broken up. They are an institution at this institution.

I spent the rest of the day hiding out. I even eat my lunch in the girls' bathroom.

My last class of the day was at the Gym. With Marcel. Coach White gives us a reintroduction to the weight room, and we must practice using the machines. Marcel and his friends already know how to use them; so, they separate from the group and have a free-throw contest, and I do not get a chance to talk to him. At one point he catches me looking at him and he winks, which makes me want to shrivel up and die.

After class is over, I wait for Marcel outside the boys' locker room; planning out what I am going to say; how I am going to explain it. I will start with; 'So about this morning-' and then I will give a little laugh; like how hilarious that was!

Marcel's the last one to come out. His hair got wet from the shower. Weirdly, boys take showers at school since girls never do. I wonder if they have stalled in there or just a bunch of showerheads and no privacy.

'Hey;' he says when he sees me, but he does not stop.

To his back I hurriedly say; 'So about this morning -' I laugh, and Marcel turns around and just looks at me.

'Oh yes. What was that all about?'

'It was a dumb joke;' I begin.

Marcel crosses his arms and leans against the lockers. 'Did it have anything to do with that letter you sent me?'

'No. I mean; yes. Tangentially.'

'Look;' he says kindly. 'You are cute. In a quirky way. But Gen and I just broke up, and I am not in a place right now where I will not be somebody's boyfriend.'

So-o...

My mouth drops. Marcel - is giving me the brush-off! I do not even like him, and he is giving me the brush-off. Also; 'quirky'? How am I 'quirky'? 'Cute in a quirky way' is an insult. A total insult!

He is still talking; still giving me kind eyes. 'I mean; I am flattered. That you would like me all this time- it is flattering; you know?'

That is enough. That is enough. 'I don't like you;' I say loudly. 'So- there's no reason you should feel flattered.'

Now it is Marcel's turn to look taken aback. He quickly looks around to see if anyone has heard. He leans forward and whispers; 'Then why did you kiss me?'

'I kissed you because I don't like you;' I explain like this should be obvious. 'See; my letters got sent out by someone. Not me.'

'Wait a minute. 'Letters'? How many of us are there?'

'Five. And the guy I do like got one too.'

Marcel frowns. 'Who?'

Why should I tell him anything? 'That's - personal.'

'Hey; I have a right to know since you pulled me into this little drama;' Marcel says with a pointed look. I suck on my top lip and shake my head and he adds; 'If there even really is a guy.'

'There is such a guy! It is Josh Sanderson.'

'Doesn't he go out with your sister?'

I nod- I am surprised he even knows this. I did not think Josh and Margot would be on his radar. 'They've broken up now. But I do not want him to know I have feelings for him - for obvious reasons. So - I told him you were my boyfriend.'

'So- you used me to save face?'

'I mean; basically.' Exactly.

'You're a funny girl.'

First- I am cute in a quirky way; now I am a funny girl. I know what that means. 'Anyway; thanks for going along with it; Marcel.' I flash him what I hope is a winning smile and turn on my heel to go. 'See yah!'

Marcel reaches out and grabs me by the backpack. 'Wait- so Sanderson thinks I am your boyfriend now; right? So, what are you going to tell him?'

I try to shrug him loose, but he will not let go. 'I have not figured that part out yet. But I will.' I lift my chin. 'I'm quirky like that.'

Marcel laughs aloud; his mouth opens wide. 'You too are funny; Lara Jean.'

MY PHONE VIBRATES NEXT TO me. It is Chris.

'Is it true?' I can hear her puffing on her cigarette.

'Is what is true?'

I am lying on my bed, on my stomach. My mom told me that if my stomach hurts, I should lie on my stomach, and it will warm up and feel better.

I do not think it is helping though. My stomach's been in knots all day.

'Did you run-up to - and kiss him like a maniac?'

I close my eyes and whimper. I wish I could say no because I am not the kind of person to do that. But I did do it; so, I guess I am. But my reasons were good!

I want to tell Chris the truth, but the whole thing is just so embarrassing.
'Yeah. I went up to Marcel- and kissed him. Like a maniac.'

Chris exhales. 'Damn!'

'I know.'

'What the hell were you thinking?'

'Honestly? I do not even know. I just did it.'

'Shit. I did not know you had it in you. I am impressed.'

'Thanks.'

'But you know Gen is going to come after you; right? They may be broken up.'

but she still thinks she owns his ass.'

My stomach lurches. 'Yeah. I know. I am scared, Chris.'

'I will do my best to protect you from her, but you know how she is. You better watch your back.' Chris hangs up.

I feel even worse than before. If Margot were here; she would say that writing those letters was pointless in the first place, and she would get on me about telling such a big lie. Then she would help me figure out a solution. But

Margot's not here; she is in Scotland- and even bigger than that; she is the one person I cannot talk to. She can never-never-never know how I felt about Josh.

After a while, I get out of bed and wander into Kellie's room. She is on the floor rifling through her bottom drawer. Without looking up, she says, 'Have you seen my pajamas with the hearts?'

'I washed them yesterday; so, they are in the dryer. Tonight, do you want to watch a movie and play Uno?' I could use a cheer-up night.

Kellie scrambles up. 'Cannot. I am going to Alicia Bernard's birthday party. It is in the schedule notebook.'

'Who's Alicia Bernard?' I plop down on Kellie's unmade bed.

'She is the new girl. She invited all the girls to our class. Her mom's making us crepes for breakfast. Do you know what a crepe is?'

'Yes...'

'Have you ever had one? I heard they can be salty or sweet.'

'Yes; I had one with Nutella and strawberries once.' Josh and Margot and I drove down to Richmond because Margot wanted to go to the Edgar Allan Poe Museum. We ate lunch at a café downtown and that is what I had.

Kellie's eyes got big and greedy. 'I hope that's the kind her mom makes.'

Then she dashes off; I find her pajamas in the laundry room downstairs.

I pick up Kellie's stuffed pig and cuddle it in my arms. So even my nine-year-old sister has plans on Friday night. If Margot were here; we would be going to the movies with Josh or stopping by the cocktail hour at the Bellevue retirement home. If my dad were home, I could muster up the courage to take his car or have him drop me off; but- I cannot even do that.

After Kellie gets picked up, I go back to my room and organize my shoe collection. It is a little early in the season to switch out my sandals for my winter shoes, but I go ahead, and do it because I am in the mood. I have thought about making my clothes too, but that is no small undertaking. Instead, I sit down and write Margot a letter on stationery my grandma bought me in Korea. It is pale blue with a border of fluffy white lambs. I talk about school, Kellie's new teacher, and a lavender skirt I ordered from a Japanese website that I am sure she will want to borrow, but I do not tell her any of the real things.

I miss her so much...

Nothing is the same without her. I am realizing now that the year is going to be a lonely one because I do not have Margot, and I do not have Josh, and is-it is just me alone. I have Chris; but not really. I- I had I had-d made more friends. If I had more friends would not have done something as stupid as kiss Marcel K. in the hallway and tell him he is-he is- he is, my boyfriend.

I WAKE UP TO THE sound of the lawnmower. It is Saturday morning, and I cannot fall back to sleep; so now I am lying in my bed staring at my walls; at all the pictures and things I have saved. I am thinking I want to shake things up. I am thinking I should paint my room. The only question is what color?

Lavender? Cotton-candy pink? Something bold; like turquoise? Just an accent wall?

One marigold wall; one salmon pink. It is a lot to consider. I should wait for Margot to come home before I make such a weighty decision.

Plus, I have never painted a room before, and Margot has, with Habitat for Humanity. She will know what to do. On Saturdays, we usually have something good for breakfast, like pancakes or frittata with frozen shredded potato and broccoli. But since there is no Kellie and no Margot; I just eat cereal instead.

Whoever heard of making pancakes or frittata for just one person? My dad's been awake for hours; he is outside mowing the lawn. I do not want to get roped into helping him do yard work; so, I make myself busy in the house and clean the downstairs. I Swiffer and Dust-Buster and wipe the tables down, and all the while my wheels are turning about how I am going to get myself out of this Marcel K. situation with even a sliver of dignity. The wheels turn and turn, but no good solutions come to mind.

When Kellie gets dropped off, I fold laundry. She plops down on the couch on her belly and asks me; 'What'd you do last night?'

'Nothing. I just stayed home.'

'And?'

'I organized my closet.' It is humiliating to say that aloud. Hastily I changed the subject. 'So did Alicia's mom make sweet crepes or salty ones?'

‘She made both. First, we had ham and cheese and then we had Nutella. How come we never have any Nutella?’

‘I think maybe because hazelnuts make Margot’s throat itch.’

‘Can we get some next time?’

‘Sure;’ I say. ‘We’ll just have to eat the whole jar before Margot comes home.’

‘No problem;’ Kellie says.

‘On a scale of one to ten; how badly do you miss Gogo?’ I asked her.

Kellie thinks this over. ‘s six-point five;’ she says at last.

‘Only six point five?’

‘Yeah; I’ve been really busy;’ she says, rolling over and kicking her legs up in the air.

‘I have hardly had time to miss Margot. You know; if you got out more; you would not miss her so much.’

I boomerang a sock at her head and Kellie exploded into a giggle fit. I am tickling her armpits when Daddy comes in from outside with a stack of mail.

‘Something came back to sender for you; Lara Jean;’ he says, handing me an envelope.

It has my handwriting! I scrambled up and snatched it out of his hands. It is my letter to Kenny from camp. It came back to me!

‘Who’s Kenny?’ Daddy wants to know.

‘Just a boy I met at church camp a long time ago;’ I say, tearing the envelope open.

Dear Kenny: It is the last day of camp and the last time I will ever see you because we live so far apart. Remember on the second day; I was scared to do archery and you made a joke about minnows and it was so funny I nearly peed my pants?

I stopped reading. A joke about minnows? How funny would it have been?

I was homesick but you made me feel better. I think I might have left camp early if it had not been for you, Kenny. So, thank you. Also, you are an amazing swimmer and I like your laugh. I wish it had been me you kissed at the bonfire last night and not Blaire H.

Take care, Kenny. Have a good rest of the summer and a good life.

Love: Lara Jean I clutch the letter to my chest.

This is the first love letter I ever wrote. I am glad it came back to me.

Though, I suppose it would not have been so bad if Kenny Donati got to known that he helped two people at camp that summer- the kid who almost drowned in the lake and twelve-year-old- Lara Jean Song Covey.

WHEN MY DAD HAS A Day off; he cooks Korean food. It is not exactly authentic, and sometimes he just goes to the Korean market and buys ready-made side dishes and marinated meat, but sometimes he will call our grandma for a recipe, and he will try.

That is the thing- Daddy tries. He does not say so, but I know it is because he does not want us to lose our connection to our Korean side, and food is the only way he knows how to contribute. After Mommy died; he used to try to make us have playdates with other Korean kids, but it always felt awkward and forced. Except I did have a crush on Marcel Kim for a minute there. Thank God; the crush never escalated into full-on love; or else I would have written him a letter too, and that would be just one more person I would have to avoid.

My dad made bossam; which is pork shoulder you slice up and then wrap in lettuce.

He brought it in sugar and salt last night and it has been roasting in the oven all day. Kellie and I keep checking on it; it smells so good.

When it is finally time to eat, my dad has everything laid out on the dining room table so pretty. A silver bowl of butter-lettuce leaves; just washed; with the water beads still clinging to the surface; a cut-glass bowl of kimchi he bought from Whole

Foods; a little bowl of pepper paste; soy sauce with scallions and ginger.

My dad's taking arty pictures of the table. 'I'm sending a pic to Margot so she can see;' he says.

‘What time is it over there?’ I asked him. It is a cozy day- it is six o’clock, and I am still in my pj’s. I am hugging my knees, sitting in the big dining-room chair with the armrests.

‘It is eleven. I am sure she is still up;’ my dad says, snapping away. ‘Why don’t you invite Josh over? We are going to need help finishing all this food.’

‘He’s probably busy;’ I say quickly. I still have not figured out what I am going to say to him about me and Marcel; much less me and him.

‘Just try him. He loves Korean food.’ Daddy moves the pork shoulder, so it is more centered. ‘Hurry; before I get cold!’

I pretended to text him on my phone. I feel a tiny bit guilty for lying, but Daddy would understand if he knew all the facts.

‘I do not understand why you kids text when you could just call. You would get an answer right away instead of waiting for one.’

‘You’re so old; Daddy;’ I say. I look down at my phone. ‘Josh cannot come over. Let us just eat. Kellie! Dinner bell!’

‘Coming!’ Kellie screams from upstairs.

‘Well; maybe he’ll come over later and take some leftovers;’ Daddy says.

‘Daddy; Josh has his own life now. Why would he come over when Margot’s not here?’

Besides, they are not even together anymore; remember?’

My dad makes a confused face. ‘What? They are not?’

I guess Margot did not tell him. Though you would have thought he could have sassed it out for himself when Josh did not come with us to the airport to drop Margot off.

Why don’t dads know anything? Does he not have eyes and ears? ‘No; they are not. And Margot is at college in Scotland. And my name is Lara Jean.’

‘All right; all right; your dad is clueless;’ Daddy says. ‘I get it. No need to rub it in.’ He scratches his chin. ‘Geez; I could have sworn Margot never mentioned anything.’

Kellie comes crashing into the dining room. ‘Yum- yum- yum.’ She slams into her chair and starts spearing pork onto her plate.

‘Kellie; we have to pray first;’ my dad says, settling into his chair.

We only ever pray before we eat when we eat in the dining room, and we only ever eat in the dining room when Daddy cooks Korean or on Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Mommy used to take us to church when we were little, and after she died; Daddy tried to keep it going, but he had Sunday shifts sometimes and it became less and less.

‘Thank you; God; for this food, you have blessed us with. Thank you for my beautiful daughters, and please watch over our Margot. In Jesus’s name, we pray; amen.’

‘Amen;’ we echo.

‘Looks pretty great; right; girls?’ My dad is grinning as he assembles a lettuce leaf with pork, rice, and kimchi. ‘Kellie; you know how to do it; right? It is like a little taco.’

Kellie nods and copies him.

I made my lettuce-leaf taco and nearly spit it out. The pork is really-really- salty.

So-o salty I could cry. But I keep chewing, and across the table; Kellie’s making a horrible face at me; but I give her a shush look. Daddy has not tried his yet; he is taking a picture of his plate.

‘So good; Daddy;’ I say. ‘It tastes like a restaurant.’

‘Thanks; Lara Jean. It came out just like the picture. I cannot believe how beautiful and crispy the top looks.’ My dad finally takes a bite, and then he frowns. ‘Is this salty to you?’

‘Not really;’ I say.

He takes another bite. ‘This... tastes- salty to me. Kellie: what do you think?’

Kellie’s chugging water. ‘No; it tastes good; Daddy.’

I give her a secret thumbs-up.

‘Hmm; no; it tastes salty.’ He swallows. ‘I followed the recipe exactly - I used the wrong kind of salt for the brine? Lara Jean; taste it again.’

I take a teeny-tiny bite, which I try to hide by putting the lettuce in front of my face.

‘Mm...’

‘Maybe if I cut more from the center -’

My phone buzzes on the table. It is a text from Josh. Was coming back from a run and understood something clearly at last on in the dining room. A normal text as if yesterday never- ever happened.

Korean food??

Josh has some sixth sense of when my dad’s cooking Korean food because he will come sniffing around right when we are sitting down to eat. He loves Korean food.

When my grandma comes to visit, he will not leave her side. He will even watch Korean dramas with her. She cuts him into pieces of apple and peels clementines for him like he is a baby. My grandma likes boys better than girls.

Now that I think of it; all the women in my family love; Josh.

Except for Mommy, who never got to meet him. But I am sure she would love him too. She would love anyone as good to Margot as Josh is; was to her.

Kellie cranes her neck to look over my shoulder. ‘Is that Josh? Is he coming over?’

‘No!’ I set down my phone and it buzzed again. Can I come over?

‘It says he wants to come over!’

My dad perks up. ‘Tell him to come over! I want to get his opinion on this...’

‘Listen; everyone in this family needs to accept that Josh is no longer a part of it. He and Margot are dunzo;’ I hesitate. Does Kellie still not know? I cannot remember if it is still supposed to be a secret. ‘I mean now that Margot’s at college and they’re long-distance...’

‘I know they’ve broken up,’ Kellie says, making a lettuce wrap with just rice.

‘Margot told me over video chat.’

Across the table, my dad makes a sad face and stuffs a piece of lettuce in his mouth.

Her mouth full; Kellie continues; ‘I just do not see why we cannot still be friends with him.

He is all our- friends. Right, Daddy?’

‘Right;’ my dad agrees. ‘And look; relationships are incredibly amorphous.

They could get back together. They could stay with friends. Who is to say what will happen in the future? I say we do not count Josh out just yet.’

We are finishing dinner when I get another text from Josh. Never mind; it says.

Part- 6

We are stuck eating that salty pork shoulder for the rest of the weekend. The next morning: my dad makes fried rice and cuts the pork into tiny pieces and says to ‘think of it like bacon.’ For dinner, I test that theory by mixing it with Kraft macaroni and cheese, and I end up throwing out the whole batch because it tastes like slop. ‘If we had a dog,’ Kellie keeps saying. I make a batch of regular macaroni instead.

After dinner, I take Sadie the Sweetheart for a walk. That is what my sisters and I call Sadie; she is a golden retriever that lives down the street. The Shahs are out of town for the night; so, they asked me to feed her and walk her. Normally, Kellie would beg to be the one to do it, but there is some movie on TV that she has been waiting to see.

Sadie and I are doing the usual route around our cul-de-sac when Josh jogs up to us in his running clothes. Crouching down to pet Sadie; he says, ‘So how are things going?’

Funny you should mention that Josh. Because I have gotten my story locked and loaded.

Marcel and I had a fight via video chat this morning (in case Josh has noticed I have not left the house all weekend), and we broke up, and I am devastated about the whole thing; because I have been in constant love with Marcel - since the seventh grade; but c'est la vie.

'Actually; Marcel and I broke up this morning.' I bite my lip and try to look sad. 'It is just; hard; you know? After I liked him for so long and then finally, he came me back.

But it is just not meant to be. I do not think he is over his breakup yet. Genevieve still has too strong a hold on him; so, there is no room in his heart for me.'

Josh gives me a funny look. 'That's not what he was saying today at McCall's.'

What was Marcel K. doing at a bookstore? He is not the bookstore type.

'What did he say?' I try to sound casual, but my heart is pounding so loudly that I am sure Sadie can hear it.

Josh keeps petting Sadie.

'What did he say?' Now I am just trying not to sound shrill. 'Like; what was said exactly?'

'When I was ringing him up; I asked him when you guys started going out, and he said recently. He said he liked you.'

What - I must look as shocked as I feel; because Josh straightens up and says, 'Yeah; I was kind of surprised too.'

'You were surprised that he would like me?'

'Well; kind of. - just is not the kind of guy who would date a girl like you.' When I stare back at him; sour and unsmiling; he quickly tries to backtrack. 'I mean; because you're not; you know-'

'I am not what? As as Genevieve?'

'No! That is not what I am saying. What I am trying to say is; you are like this sweet, innocent girl who likes to be at home with her family, and I do not know; I guess - does not strike me as someone who would be into that.'

Before he can say another word, I grab my phone out of my jacket pocket and say, 'That's Marcel calling me right now; so, he does like homely girls.' 'I did not say homely! I said you like to be at home!'

'Later; Josh.' I speed walk away, dragging Sadie with me. On my phone, I say, 'Oh hey; Marcel.'

IN CHEM, Marcel SITS A row in front of me.

I wrote him a note. Why would you tell Josh that we are- I hesitate and then finish a thing.

I kicked the back of his chair, and he turned around and I handed him the note. He slouches in his seat to read it; then I watch as he scribbles something. He tips back into his chair and drops the note on my desk without looking at me.

A thing?

Ha- ha- ha...

I press down so hard my pencil tip chips off. Please answer the question.

We will talk later.

I let out a frustrated sigh and Matt, my lab partner, gave me a funny look.

After class Marcel swept away all his friends; they left in a large group. I am packing up my backpack when he returns; alone. He hopes upon the table.

'So; let us talk;' he says, super casual.

I clear my throat and try to gather my bearings. 'Why did you tell Josh we were' I almost say-a thing' again; but then change it to 'together?'

'I do not get what you are so upset about. I did you a favor. I could have just as easily blown up your spot.'

I pause. He is right. He could have. 'So why didn't you?'

'You have sure got a funny way of saying thank you. You're welcome; by the way.'

Automatically I say, 'Thank you.' Wait. Why am I thanking him? 'I appreciate you letting me kiss you; but-'

‘You’re welcome;’ he says again.

Ugh! He is so insufferable. Just for that, I am going to toss a little dig his way.

‘That was; generous of you. To let me do that. But I have already explained to Josh that it is not going to work out with us because Genevieve has you whipped; so, it is all good. You can stop pretending now.’

Marcel glares at me. ‘I’m not whipped.’

‘But aren’t you; though? I mean; you guys have been together since the seventh grade. You are her property.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about;’ Marcel scoffs.

‘There was a rumor last year that she made you get a tattoo of her initials on your butt for her birthday.’ I pause. ‘So- did you?’ I reach around him, and fake tries to lift the back of his shirt. He yelps and jumps away from me, and I collapse in a fit of- giggles.

‘So- you do have a tattoo!’

‘I don’t have a tattoo!’ he yells. ‘And we are not even together anymore; so, can you stop this shit? We broke up. We are over. I am done with her.’

‘Wait; didn’t she break up with you?’ I ask.

Marcel shot me a dirty look. ‘It was mutual.’

Hastily I say, ‘Well, I am sure you will get back together soon. You have broken up before; right? Only to get back together again; like immediately. It is probably because you were each other’s firsts. That is why you cannot let each other go. I have heard that is how it is with firsts; especially with guys.’

Marcel’s mouth drops. ‘How do you know- ‘

‘Oh; everybody knows. You guys did its first year in her parents’ basement; right?’

He gives a grudging nod.

‘See? Even I know, and I am nobody. Even if you do stay broken up for real this time; which I doubt; it is not like any other girl can date you.’ Meaningfully I say, ‘Let us not forget what happened to Jamila Singh.’

Marcel and Genevieve broke up for a month last year; so, Marcel started dating Jamila Singh. Jamila might even be prettier than Genevieve- a different kind of pretty; anyway.

More like hot. She has long wavy black hair and a little waist and a big butt.

Let us just say it did not end well for her. Not only did Genevieve cut her out of the group; but she told everyone that Jamila's family had an Indonesian slave living with them when it was just her cousin. And I am sure it was Genevieve who started a rumor online that Jamila washed her hair only once a month. The final straw was when Jamila's parents got an anonymous e-mail saying that she was having sex with Marcel. Her parents transferred her right out and put her in a private school. Genevieve and Marcel were back together by the spring formal.

'Gen says she didn't have anything to do with that.'

I gave him a real look. 'Please; Marcel. I know her well and so do you.'

Well, I did know her well. But I do not think people change at the core. They are who they are.'

Slowly Marcel says, 'That is right. You two were BFFs back in the day.'

'We were friends;' I agree. 'I wouldn't call us BFFs; but -' Wait a minute; why are we talking about me again? 'Everybody knows it was Genevieve who told Jamila's parents.'

You do not have to be a detective to figure out that Genevieve was jealous of her.

Jamila was the prettiest girl in our grade, next to Genevieve. Gen was always a very jealous person. I remember this one time my dad bought me a ... um- you know...'

Marcel's thoughtfully staring at me, and it suddenly makes me nervous.

'What?'

'Let us just do this for a little while.'

'Do what?'

'Let us let people think we're a couple.'

Wait - what?

'It is driving Gen crazy not knowing what is up with you and me. Why don't we let her sit with it a little longer? It is perfect. You date me first, and then Gen will get it that we are over. You will be breaking the seal.' He raises an eyebrow at me.

'Do you even know what breaking the seal means?'

'Yes; of course; I know what that means.' I have no idea what that means. I make a mental note to ask Chris the next time I see her.

Marcel comes up close to me, and I scoot backward. He laughs and cocks his head to the side and puts his hands on my shoulders. 'So then break my seal.'

I let out a nervous laugh. 'Ha-ha; sorry; Marcel; but I am not interested. In you.'

'Well; yes. That is the whole point. I am not interested in you either. Like at all.'

Marcel shudders. 'So- what do you say?'

I shrug my shoulders; so, his hands fall away. 'Hello; I just got through explaining to you how Gen will kill any girl that goes near you!'

Marcel dismisses this. 'Gen is all talk. She would never do anything to anybody.'

'You just do not know her as I do.' When I do not say anything; he takes my silence as encouragement, and he says; 'It would help you out too; you know. With that kid Josh. We are not so worried about losing face in front of him. This could save you from more humiliation.'

'Because why? Why- would you be with him when you could be with me? Well, pretend to be with me. Strictly business; though. I cannot have you falling in love with me; too.'

It gives me immense pleasure to look up into his Handsome Boy face and sweetly say; 'Marcel; I don't even want to be your pretend girlfriend; much less your real one.'

He blinks. 'Why not?'

‘You read my letter. You are not my type. Nobody would ever believe I would like you.’

‘It is up to you. I am just trying to do us both a favor.’ Then he shrugs and looks over my shoulder like he is bored with this conversation. ‘But Josh believed it.’

In a flash; without even thinking; I say, ‘Okay. Let us do it.’

Hours later; I am lying in bed that night still marveling about it all. What will people say when they see me walking down the hall with Marcel?

THE NEXT MORNING: Marcel was sitting in the parking lot for me when I got off the bus.

‘Hey;’ he says. ‘Are you seriously taking the bus every day?’

‘My car is being fixed; remember? My accident?’

He sighs like this is somehow offensive to him; me taking the bus to school.

Then he grabs my hand and holds it as we walk into school together.

This is the first time I have walked down the school hallway holding hands with a boy.

It should feel momentous; special, but it does not because it is not real. Honestly, it feels like nothing.

Emily Nussbaum does a double take when she sees us. Emily is Gen’s best friend.

She is staring so hard I am surprised she does not take a quick pic on her phone to send to Gen.

Marcel keeps stopping to say hi to people, and I stand there smiling like it is the most natural thing in the world. Me and Marcel.

At one point I try to let go of his hand because mine is starting to feel sweaty, but he tightens his grip. ‘Your hand is too hot;’ I hissed.

Through clenched teeth, he says, ‘No; your hand is.’

I am sure Genevieve’s hands are never sweaty. She could hold hands for days without getting overheated.

When we get to my locker, we finally drop our hands; so, I can dump my books inside. I am shutting my locker door when Marcel leans in and tries to kiss me on the mouth. I was so startled I turned my head, and we hit foreheads.

‘Ow!’ Marcel rubs his forehead and glares at me.

‘Well; don’t just sneak up on me like that!’ My forehead hurts too. We banged them hard, like cymbals. If I looked up right now; I would see a blue cartoon- birdies.

‘Lower your voice; dummy;’ he says through clenched teeth.

‘Don’t you call me a dummy; you dummy;’ I whisper back.

Marcel heaves a big sigh like he is annoyed with me. I am about to snap at him that it is his fault; not mine when I catch a glimpse of Genevieve gliding down the hallway.

‘Gotta goes;’ I say, and I dart off in the opposite direction.

‘Wait!’ Marcel calls out.

But- I keep darting.

I am lying on my bed with my pillow over my face reliving the horrible kiss that was not. I keep trying to block it out, but it just keeps coming back.

I put my hand to my forehead. I do not think I can do this. It is all so - I mean; the kissing; the sweaty hands; everybody looking. It is too much.

I am just going to have to tell him I changed my mind, and I do not want to do this anymore, and that will be that. I do not have his number, and I do not want to say any of this in an email; either. I will have to go to his house. It is not far; I still remember the way.

I run downstairs; passing Kellie; who is balancing a plate of Oreos and a glass of milk on a tray. ‘I’m borrowing your bike!’ I yell as I fly past her.

‘I’ll be back soon!’

‘You better not let anything happen to it!’ Kellie yells back.

I grab her helmet and the bike and tear them out of the yard, pedaling as fast as I can. My knees hit my chest a little, but I am not that much taller than Kellie; so, it is not so bad.

Marcel-

lives two neighborhoods away. It takes me less than twenty minutes to get there.

When I do, there are not any cars in the driveway. Marcel's not home. My heart sinks to the pavement. What do I do now? Sit and wait for him on the front porch like a stalker? What if his mom comes home first?

I take off my helmet and sit for a minute so I can rest. My hair is damp and sweaty from the ride over, and I am exhausted. I try to run my fingers through my hair; smooth it out. It is a lost cause.

As I am contemplating texting Chris and seeing if she can come to get me, Marcel's car comes roaring down the street and up the driveway. I drop my phone and then scramble to pick it up.

Marcel climbs out of his car and raises his eyebrows at me. 'Look who is here. My adoring girlfriend.'

I stood up and waved at him. 'Can I talk to you for a minute?'

He slings his backpack over his shoulder and takes his time sauntering over.

He sits down on the front step like a prince on his throne, and I stand in front of him; my helmet in one hand and my phone in the other. 'So-o what's up?' he drawls. 'Let me guess. You are here to back out on me; am I right?'

He is so smug; so sure, of himself. I do not want to give him the satisfaction of being right.

'I just wanted to go over our game plan with you,' I say, sitting down. 'Get our story straight before people start asking questions.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Oh. Okay. Makes sense. So how did we get together?'

I clasp my hands in my lap and recite; 'When I got in that car accident last week, you happened to be driving by, and you waited for Triple-A with me and then you drove me home. You were nervous the whole time because you have had kind of a thing for me since middle school. It was your first kiss. So- this was your big chance-'

‘You were my first kiss?’ he interrupts. ‘How about I was your first kiss. That is a lot more believable.’

I ignored him and continued. ‘This was your big chance. So- you took it.

You asked me out that very day and we have been spending time together ever since and now we are a couple.’

‘I don’t think Gen’s going to buy this;’ he says, shaking his head.

‘Marcel;’ I say in my most patient voice; ‘the most believable lies are the ones that are at least a little bit true. I got into a car accident; you stopped and sat with me; we kissed in middle school.’

‘It’s not that.’

‘Then what?’

‘Gen and I hooked up that day after I saw you.’

I sigh... ‘Okay... Spare me the details. My story still works; though. After the car accident, you could not get me out of your mind; so, you asked me out as soon as Genevieve dumped - I mean; as soon as you guys broke up.’ I clear my throat. ‘Since we’re on the topic; I’d also like to set some ground rules.’

‘What kind of ground rules?’ he asks; leaning back.

I press my lips together and take a breath. ‘Well - I don’t want you trying to kiss me again.’

Marcel curls his lip at me. ‘Trust me; I do not want to do it either. My forehead still hurts from this morning. I have a bruise.’ He pushes his hair off his forehead. ‘Do you see a bruise?’

‘No; but I see a receding hairline.’

‘What?’

Ha... I knew that would get him. Marcel’s so vain. ‘Calm down; I am only kidding. Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?’ ‘You’re going to write this down?’

Primly I say, ‘It’ll help us remember.’

Rolling his eyes; Marcel reaches into his backpack; pulls out a notebook, and hands it to me. I turn to a clean page and write at the top, Contract. Then I write No kissing.

‘Are people going to buy it if we never touch each other in public?’ Marcel asks, looking skeptical.

‘I do not think relationships are about physicality. There are ways to show you care about someone; not just using your lips.’ Marcel’s smiling, and he looks like he is about to crack a joke; so, I swiftly add; ‘Or any other body part.’

He groans. ‘You must give me something here, Lara Jean. I have a reputation to uphold. None of my friends will believe I suddenly turned into a monk to date you. How about at least a hand in your back-jean pocket? Trust me; it will be strictly professional.’

I do not say what I am thinking, which is that he cares too much about what people think about him. I just nod and write down; Marcel is allowed to put a hand in Lara Jean’s back jean pocket.

‘But no more kissing,’ I say, keeping my head down so he cannot see me blush.

‘You’re the one who started it,’ he reminds me. ‘And also; I don’t have any STDs; so, you can get that out of your head.’

‘I don’t think you have any STDs.’ I look back up at him. ‘The thing is - I have never had a boyfriend before. I have never been on a real date before or held hands walking down the hallway. This is all new for me; so, I am sorry about the forehead thing this morning. I just - wish all these firsts were happening for real and not with you.’

Marcel is thinking this over. He says, ‘Huh. Okay. Let us just save some stuff; then.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Sure... We will save some stuff for you to do when it is the real thing and not for show.’

I am touched. Who knew Marcel could be so thoughtful and generous?

Like I will not pay for stuff. I will save that for a guy who likes you.’

My smile fades. ‘I wasn’t expecting you to pay for anything!’

Marcel's doing well. 'And I won't walk you to class or buy you flowers.'

'I get the picture.' It seems to me like Marcel's less concerned about me and more concerned about his wallet. He sure is cheap. 'So; when you were with Genevieve; what kinds of things did she like you to do?'

I am afraid he is going to take this opportunity to make a joke; but instead; he stares off into space and says, 'She was always bitching at me to write her notes.'

'Notes?'

'Yeah; at school. I did not get why I could not just text her. It is immediate; it is efficient.'

'Why not use the technology that is available to us?'

This I understand perfectly. Genevieve did not want notes. She wanted letters.

Real letters were written in his handwriting on actual paper that she could hold, keep, and read whenever the mood struck her. They were proof, solid, and tangible; that someone was thinking about her.

'I'll write you a note a day;' Marcel says suddenly; with gusto. 'That'll drive her ass crazy.'

I write down; Marcel will write Lara Jean one note- every day.

Marcel leans in. 'Write down what you must go to some parties with me.'

And write down no romcoms.'

'Who said anything about romcoms? Not every girl wants to watch romcoms.'

'I can just tell that you're the kind of girl who does.'

I am annoyed that he has this perception of me, and even more annoyed that he is right.

I write, NO DUMB ACTION MOVIES.

'Then what does that leave us with?' Marcel demands.

‘Superhero movies; horror movies; period films; documentaries; foreign films-’

Marcel makes a face; grabs the pen and paper from me and writes down; NO FOREIGN FILMS. He also writes; Lara Jean will make Marcel’s picture her phone wallpaper. ‘And vice versa!’ I speak. I pointed my phone at him. ‘Smile.’

Marcel smiles, and ugh; it is annoying how handsome he is. Then he reaches for his phone, and I stop him. ‘Not right now. My hair looks sweaty and gross.’ ‘Good point;’ he says, and I want to punch him.

‘Can you also write down that under no circumstances can either of us tell anyone the truth?’ I asked him.

‘The first rule of Fight Club;’ Marcel says knowingly.

‘I’ve never seen that movie.’

‘Of course; you have not;’ he says, and I make a face at him. Also- a mental note; watch Fight Club.

Marcel writes it down, and then I sit next to him and take the pen and underline ‘under no circumstances twice. ‘What about an end date?’ I asked suddenly.

‘What do you mean...?’

‘I mean; how long are we going to do this for? Like two weeks? A month...?’

Marcel shrugs. ‘For as long as we feel it.’

‘But- don’t you think we should have something set-’

He cuts me off. ‘You need to relax, Lara Jean. Life does not have to be so planned. Just roll with it and let it happen.’

I sigh and say, ‘Words of wisdom from the great -;’ and Marcel wiggles his eyebrows at me. ‘Just if it is over by the time my sister comes back for Christmas break. She can always tell when I am lying.’

‘Oh; we’ll be done by then;’ he says.

‘Good;’ I say, and then I sign the paper, and so does he, and we have our contract.

I am too proud to ask for a ride, and Marcel does not offer it; so, I put my helmet back on and ride Kellie's bike back home. I was halfway there when I realized we never exchanged phone numbers. I do not even know my own boyfriend's phone number.

I am AT McCall's BOOKSTORE, PICKING up a copy of The Glass Menagerie for English and scanning the store for Josh. Now that Marcel and I have everything worked out; I can triumphantly crow all about it. That will show him thinking I am just a homebody no boy would want to date.

I spotted him setting up a display of new books in the nonfiction section. He does not see me; so, I sneak up behind and yell; 'Boo!'

He jumps and drops a book on the floor. 'You scared the crap out of me!'

'That was the point; Joshy!' I am having a giggle fit. The look on his face! I wonder; why is it so deliciously funny to sneak up on people.

'All right; all right. Quit laughing. What are you here for?'

I held up my book and waved it in his face. 'I have Mr. Radnor for English. You had him; right?'

'Yeah; he is good. He is strict but fair. I still have my notes if you want them.'

'Thanks;' I say. Brightly I add; 'So guess what. Marcel and I have not broken up.'

It was just a misunderstanding.'

'Oh yes...?' Josh starts stacking books into a column.

'Mm-hmm. I saw him yesterday and we talked and talked, for hours. I feel like I could talk to him about anything; you know? He just really gets me.'

Josh's forehead wrinkles. 'What do you guys talk about?'

'Oh; everything. Movies; books; the usual stuff.'

'Huh. I never saw him as the reading type.' He squints and looks over my shoulder.

'Hey; I must go help Janice out at the counter. When you are ready to check out, come to my register so I can give you, my discount.'

Hmm; this is not exactly the reaction I was hoping for. I barely even got a chance to grow. 'Sounds good,' I say, but he is already walking away.

I hugged my book to my chest. Now that Josh knows I am not in love with him anymore and I am with Marcel, I guess everything will slide right back into place and be normal again.

Like my letter never- ever happened.

'MARGOT CALLED WHEN YOU were out today;' my dad says over dinner.

Dinner is just salad. Salad for me and Daddy and cereal for Kellie. There were supposed to be chicken breasts, but I forgot to take them out of the freezer this morning; so, there's just lettuce and carrots with balsamic dressing. Daddy's supplementing him with two boiled eggs, and I have a piece of buttered toast. Some dinner. Cereal and lettuce. I need to get to the grocery store.

Since Margot left; I have only spoken to her twice, and once was over video chat with all of us crowded around my laptop. I did not get to ask her about the good stuff- authentic; all the adventures she has been going on and the people she has been meeting.

I heard that British people drink absinthe at pubs. I wonder if she is tried it by now. I have emailed Margot so many times and have only gotten back one email return so far.

I understand that she is busy, but the least she can do is email back once a day. For all she knows; I could be dead in a ditch. 'What did she say?' I ask as I cut my carrot into tiny pieces.

'She's thinking about trying out for the shinty club team;' my dad says, wiping salad dressing off his chin.

'What's shinty?' Kellie asks me, and I shrug.

'It's a Scottish sport that's like field hockey,' Daddy explains. 'It started out as a safe swordfight practice in medieval Scotland.'

Boring. Before Daddy can get started on telling us more about medieval Scotland; I say, 'Let us send Gogo a care package! The stuff she cannot get over there.' 'Yeah!' Kellie cheers.

'What should we send?' I ask. 'I say we all contribute something.'

Daddy chews and taps his finger to his chin. 'I'll send gummy vitamins,' he says. 'And Advil. She only took a small bottle of Advil, and you know how she gets migraines sometimes.'

'I approve.' I point my fork at Kellie. 'And what about you?'

'I've got something I could send,' Kellie says. 'Should I get it?'

Daddy and I look at each other and shrug. 'Sure.'

Kellie comes running back with a picture she is drawing of Margot. Petting a dog. The exact breed of dog Kellie wants. Akita. I must laugh.

Kellie frowns. 'What's so funny?'

'Nothing,' I say.

'Do you think it's good enough?' Kellie asks me. 'Good enough to hang up on her wall?'

'Definitely,' I say.

'No; I want you to look at it,' she says. 'Critique it. I can always do better.'

Margot will not want it if it is not my best work.'

'Kellie; its is' I say. 'Why would I lie?'

She sighs. 'I just don't know if it's finished yet.'

'Only the artist knows,' Daddy says with a sage nod.

'What do you think about the dog?' she asks him. 'Isn't it cute?'

Daddy takes the picture from me and looks at it closely. 'Yes; the dog is undeniably a good-looking dog.'

'I'm Asian too,' she says. Kellie sits back down and takes a bite of cereal and tries not to smile. She is doing her inception thing. Planting positive associations about dogs in Daddy's head. The kid never rests. She always has an angel.

'What else is going in the care package?' Kellie wants to know.

I started ticking off my fingers. 'Tampons because I don't know if they have our brand in Scotland; flannel pj's; thick socks; Girl Scout cookies-'

‘Where are we going to get Girl Scout cookies this time of year?’ Daddy asks.

‘I have a box of Thin Mints hidden in the freezer;’ I say.

He gives me a hurt look. ‘Hidden from who?’

Thin Mints are his favorite. If there are Thin Mints in the house; forget about it. Daddy is a Thin Mint Monster.

I give an enigmatic shrug. ‘Also- I’m sending Margot’s favorite kind of roller-ball pen, and - I think that’s it.’

‘Don’t forget her brown boots;’ my dad reminds me. ‘She specifically requested we send her brown boots with the laces.’

‘Did she?’ I was hoping Margot had not noticed she had left them behind.

‘When did she say that?’

‘She emailed me yesterday.’

‘I’ll see if I can find them.’

My dad says, ‘weren’t you wearing them this weekend?’ and at the same time; Kellie says, ‘They’re in your closet.’

I throw up my hands. ‘All right; all right!’

‘If you get the box together tonight; I can drop it off at the post office tomorrow morning on my way to work;’ Daddy offers.

I shake my head. ‘I want to send the scarf I have been knitting, and it will not be ready in time. In another week or two?’

Slurping her milk; Kellie waves a hand at me and advises; ‘Just give up on the scarf already. Knitting is not your thing.’

I open my mouth to argue and then close it. She is right. If we wait for my scarf to be done to send the care package; Margot will be out of college already. ‘All right;’ I say. ‘We will send the care package sans scarf. I am not saying I am giving up on knitting; though. I will keep chugging along on it and have it ready for you for your Christmas gift; Kellie.’ I smile at her sweetly. ‘It is pink. You are favorite.’

Kellie's eyes go wide with horror. 'Or Margot. You could also give it to Margot.'

Kellie slides a piece of paper under my door that night. It is her Christmas list. It is only September- Christmas is still months away! 'Puppy' is written at the top in capital block letters. She also wants an ant farm and a skateboard and a TV in her room. Yes, that

The TV's not going to happen. I could buy her an ant farm; though. Or I could talk to Daddy about the puppy. She has not said so, but she misses Margot a lot. In a way, Margot is the only mother she knows. It must be hard for Kellie to have her so far away.

I will just have to remind myself to be more patient with her; more attentive. She needs me now.

I go to her room and climb into her bed. She has just turned the lights off but is already halfway to sleep. 'What if we got a kitten?' I whisper...

Her eyes fly open. 'No way in heck!'

'Don't you think we're more of a kitten family?' Dreamily I say, 'A fluffy gray-and-white kitten with a bushy tail. We could name him Prince if it is a boy. Ooh; or Gandalf the Gray! Wouldn't that be cute? Or if it is a girl, Agatha. Or Tilly. Or Boss. It depends on her personality.'

'Quit it,' Kellie warns. 'We are not getting a cat. Cats are blah. They are also very manipulative.'

Impressed; I say, 'Where'd you learn that word?'

'TV!'

'A puppy is a lot of work. Who is going to feed him, walk him, and house-train him?'

'I will do it. I will do it all. I am responsible enough to take care of it on my own.'

I snuggle closer to her. I love the way Kellie's head smells after she has had a bath. 'Ha! You do not even do the dishes ever. And you never clean your room. And when have you ever helped fold laundry at least once in your life? I mean; really; if you do not do any of those things, how can you be responsible for another living creature?'

Kellie shoves me off. 'Then I'll help more!'

'I'll believe it when I see it.'

'If I help out more; will you help me convince Daddy about the puppy?'

'If you help out more;' I agree. 'If you can prove to me; you're not a baby anymore.'

Kellie will be ten in January. That is old enough to help around the house.

Margot babies her too much; I think. 'I am putting you in charge of emptying the upstairs trash cans once a week. And helping with the laundry.'

'So - would I get a raise in my allowance?'

'No. The incentive is me helping you convince Daddy to get a dog, and you not being so babyish anymore.' I fluff up my pillow. 'By the way; I'm sleeping in here tonight.'

Kellie gives me a swift kick and I almost fall out of bed. 'You're the babyish one; not me; Lara Jean.'

'Just let me sleep in here one night!'

'You take up all the covers.'

Kellie tries to kick me again, but I make my body heavy and pretend I am already asleep.

Soon we both fall asleep for real.

Sunday night I was doing my homework in bed when I got a call from a number I did not recognize. 'Hello?'

'Hey. What are you doing?' 'Um - sorry; but who's this?'

'It's Marcel!'

'Oh. How did you get my number?'

'Don't worry about it.'

There is a longish silence. It is agonizing; every millisecond that ticks by with neither of us talking; but I do not know what to say. 'So; what did you want?'

Marcel laughs. 'You so ask, Covey. Your cars are in the shop, right? So how about I pick you up from school?' 'Okay.'

'Seven-thirty.'

'Okay.'

'Okay-'

'Bye;' I say, and I hang up.

THE NEXT MORNING: I WAKE Kellie up early; so, she can braid my hair.

'Save me alone;' she says, rolling onto her other side. 'I'm sleeping.'

'Please; please; please can I get a braid crown?' I ask her, squatting in front of her bed.

'No. You can have a side braid and that's it.'

Swiftly Kellie braids my braid, and then she falls right back to sleep, and I am on my way to figure out clothes. Now that Marcel and I are official, people will be noticing me more; so, I should wear something good. I tried on a polka-dot puffy-sleeved dress with tights; but- it does not look right. Neither does my favorite heart sweater with the little pom-poms.

Everything looks so kiddish suddenly. I finally settled on a floral baby-doll dress I ordered off a Japanese street fashion site, with ankle boots. It has a seventies London look.

When I run downstairs at seven twenty-five, Kellie is sitting at the kitchen table with her jeans on jacket waiting for me. 'Why are you downstairs already?' I asked her. Her bus does not come until eight.

'I have my field trip today; so, I must go to school early. Remember?'

I ran and looked at the calendar in the refrigerator. There it is in my handwriting- Kellie's Field Trip. Shoot.

I was supposed to drive her, but that was before my car accident. Daddy had an overnight shift at the hospital, and he is not home yet; so, I do not have a car.

'Can one of the Cool moms come to get you?'

‘It is too late. The bus leaves at seven forty.’ Kellie’s face is getting splotchy, and her chin is starting to quiver. ‘I can’t miss the bus; Lara Jean!’

‘Okay; okay. Do not get upset. I have a ride coming for us right now. Do not worry; okay?’ I pluck a greenish banana from the banana hammock.

‘Let us go- outside and wait for him.’

‘Who?’

‘Just hurry.’

Kellie and I are waiting on the front steps sharing the greenish banana. We both prefer an unripe; greenish banana to a brown-speckled one. It is Margot who likes the speckled ones. I will try to save them for banana bread, but Margot gobbles them up; mushy bruised parts and all. I shudder to even think of it.

There is a chill in the air; even though it is still September and therefore still summer. Kellie rubs her legs to keep warm. She says she will wear shorts in October; that is her plan.

It is past seven-thirty now and no Marcel yet. I am starting to get nervous, but I do not want Kellie to worry. I decided that if he is not here in exactly two minutes; I will go next door to Josh’s and ask him to run Kellie over to the school.

Across the street, our neighbor Ms. Rossinchild waves at us as she locks her front door; a big coffee thermos in her hand. She dashes toward her car.

‘Good morning; Ms. Rossinchild;’ we chorus. I elbow Kellie and say, ‘Five; four; three-’

‘Damn it!’ Ms. Rossinchild shrieks. Ms. Rossinchild had spilled coffee in her hand. She does this at least twice a week. I do not know why she does not just slow down or just put the top of the thermos or not fill it up so high.

Just then Marcel drives up, and his black Audi is even shinier in the daylight. I get up and say, ‘Come on Kellie;’ and she trails behind me.

‘Who’s that?’ I heard her whisper.

His windows are down. I come up close to the passenger side and stick my head in.

‘Is it okay if we drop my little sister off at the elementary school?’ I ask.

‘She has to be there early today for a field trip.’

Marcel looks annoyed. ‘Why didn’t you mention it yesterday?’

‘I didn’t know about it yesterday!’ Behind me, I can feel rather than hear Kellie fidgeting.

‘This is a two-seater;’ Marcel says as if I cannot see with my own two eyes.

‘I know that. I will just put Kellie in my lap and the seat belt over us.’ Which my dad would kill me for if he knew; but I am not telling, and neither will Kellie.

‘Yeah; because that sounds safe.’ He is being sarcastic. I hate it when people are sarcastic. It was so cheap.

‘It’s two miles!’

He sighs. ‘Fine. Get in.’

I open the door and slide in, laying my bag at my feet. ‘Come on; Kellie.’ I make space for her between my legs, and she climbs in. I strap us tightly; my arms around her.

‘Don’t tell Daddy;’ I say.

‘Duh;’ she says.

‘Hey. What is your name?’ Marcel asks her.

Kellie hesitates. Increasingly this happens. With new people, she must decide if she will be Kellie or Katherine.

‘Katherine.’

‘But everyone calls you Kellie?’

‘Everyone who knows me;’ Kellie says. ‘You can call me Katherine.’

Marcel’s eyes light up. ‘You’re tough;’ he says admiringly; which Kellie ignores, but she keeps sneaking peeks at him. He has that effect on people. On girls. Women; even.

We drive through the neighborhood in silence. At last, Kellie says, ‘So who are you?’

I look over at him and he is looking straight ahead. 'I am Marcel. Your sister's; um; boyfriend.'

My mouth drops. We never said anything about lying to our families! I thought this was going to be an at-school-only thing.

Kellie goes completely still in my arms. Then she twists around to look at me and shrieks; 'He is your boyfriend? Since when?'

'Since last week.' At least that much is the truth. Sort of.

'But you never said anything! Not one frigging word; Lara Jean!'

Automatically I say, 'Do not say 'frig.'

'Not one frigging word;' Kellie repeats with a shake of her head.

Marcel cracks up, and I give him a dirty look. 'It all happened fast,' he offers.

'There was barely time to tell anybody-'

'Was I talking to you?' Kellie snaps. 'No; I do not think so. I was talking to my sister.'

Marcel's eyes widen, and I can see him trying to keep a straight face.

'Does Margot know?' she asked me.

'Not yet, and don't you go mentioning it to her before I have a chance to.'

'Hmph.' This appeases Kellie a tiny bit. Knowing something first; before Margot is important.

Then we are at the elementary school and thank God; the bus is still there in the parking lot. All the kids are lined up in front of it. I let out the breath I have been holding the whole way over, and Kellie is already untangling herself from me and bounding out of the car. 'Have an enjoyable time on the field trip!' I called out.

She spins back around and points an accusing finger at me. 'I want to hear the whole story when I get home!' With that decree, she is off running for the bus loop.

I re-buckle my seat belt. ‘Um; I don’t remember us deciding to tell our families that we’re boyfriend-girlfriend.’

‘She was going to have to find out at some point; with me chauffeuring you and her around town.’

‘You did not have to say ‘boyfriend.’ You could have just said ‘friend.’

We are getting close to school now; just two more lights. I give my side braid a nervous tug.

‘Um; so, have you talked to Genevieve at all?’

Marcel frowns. ‘No.’

‘She hasn’t said a word to you about it?’

‘Nope. But I am sure she will soon.’

Marcel speeds into the parking lot and zooms into space. When we got out of the car and headed for the entrance, Marcel’s fingers laced through mine. He is going to drop me off at my locker as he did before, but he leads us in the opposite direction.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked him.

‘Cafeteria...’

I am about to protest, but before I can; he says firmly; ‘We need to start hanging out in public more. The caf- is where we will get the most bang for our buck.’

Josh will not be in the cafeteria- that is for popular people- but I know who will most certainly be there- Genevieve.

When we walk in; she is holding court at their lunch table- her and Emily Nussbaum- and Gabe and Darrell from the lacrosse team. They are all eating breakfast and drinking coffee. She must have a sixth sense where Marcel is concerned because she beams lasers at us immediately. I start slowing down, which Marcel does not seem to notice.

Marcel makes a beeline for the table, but at the last second, I chicken out. I tug on his hand and say, ‘Let us sit over here;’ and point to an empty table in their line of vision.

‘Why...?’

'Just- please.' I think fast. 'Because you see; it would be too blatantly jerky of you to- bring a girl to the table after you have only been broken up for; like; a minute. And this way Genevieve can watch from afar and wonder for just a little bit longer.' And I am terrified.

As I drag Marcel over to the table; he waves to his friends; shrugging his shoulders like- Wha-d-d-are-you-going to do? I sit down, and Marcel sits down next to me. He pulls my chair closer to his. Raising his eyebrows, he asks; 'Are you that afraid of her?' 'No.' Yes.

'You're going to have to face her sometime.' Marcel leans forward and grabs my hand again and starts tracing the lines on my palm.

'Quit;' I say. 'You're creeping me out.'

He flashes me a hurt look. 'Girls love it when I do that.'

'No; Genevieve loves it. Or she pretends to love it. You know, now that I think of it; you do not have that much experience when it comes to girls. Just one girl.' I take my hand away from him and perch it on the table. 'I mean; everybody thinks you're this big heartbreaker when you've only ever been with Genevieve and then Jamila for like a month-'

'Okay; okay. I get it. Enough already. They are watching us.'

'Who is? Your table?'

Marcel shrugs. 'Everyone...'

I did a quick look around. He is right. Everyone is watching us. Marcel's so used to people watching him, but I am not. It feels funny; like a new sweater that makes my skin feel itchy. Because no one ever watches me. It is like being on stage. And the funny thing; the strange thing is it is not an altogether unpleasant feeling.

I am pondering this when my eyes meet Genevieve's. There is this very moment of recognition between us like I know you. Then she looks away and whispers something to Emily.

Genevieve is looking at me like I am a tasty morsel, and she is going to eat me alive and then spit out my bones. And then, just as quickly; the look is gone, and she is smiling.

I shivered. The truth is Genevieve scared me even when we were kids. One time I was playing at her house, and Margot called looking for me to come

home for lunch, and Genevieve told her I was not there. She would not let me leave because she wanted to keep playing dollhouse. She kept blocking the door. I had to call her mom.

The clock reads five minutes past eight. The bell's going to ring soon. 'We should get going,' I say, and when I stand up; my knees feel shaky. 'Ready?'

He is distracted because he was looking over at his table of friends. 'Yeah; sure.' Marcel gets up and propels me toward the door; he keeps one hand on the small of my back.

On the other hand, he waves at his friends. 'Smile,' he whispers to me; so, I do.

I must admit; it is not a bad feeling; to have a boy sweep you along; usher you through crowds. It is the feeling of being cared for. It is like walking in a dream. I am still me and Marcel's still Marcel, but everything around me feels fuzzy and unreal; like the time Margot and I snuck champagne on New Year's Eve.

I never knew it before, but I think all this time I have been invisible.

Just someone who was there. Now that people think I am Marcel's girlfriend, they are wondering about me. Like why? What about me making Marcel like me? What do I have? What makes me so special? I would be wondering too.

I am now a Mysterious Girl. Before I was just a Quiet Girl. But becoming Marcel's girlfriend has elevated me to Mysterious Girl.

I take the bus home from school because Marcel must go to lacrosse practice. I sit in the front the way I have been doing, but today people have questions for me.

Undergraduates: mostly, because hardly any upper-class students take the bus.

'What's with you and-?' A sophomore girl named Manda asks me.

I pretend like I do not hear her.

Instead, I sink lower into my seat and open the note Marcel left for me in my locker.

Dear Lara Jean.

Excellent job today.

Marcel-

I start to smile and then I hear Manda whisper to her friend; 'It is so weird that - would like her. I mean - look at her and then look at Genevieve.' I can feel myself shrink. Is that what everyone thinks? It is not that I am a Mysterious Girl.

It is that I am a Not Good Enough Girl.

When I get home; I go straight to my room; put on a soft nightgown and release my braid. It is a sweet relief to let it out. My scalp is tingling with gratitude. Then I lie in my bed and stare out the window until it gets dark. My phone keeps buzzing, and I am sure it is Chris, but I do not lift my head to look.

Kellie barges in at one point and says, 'Are you sick? Why are you still lying-in bed like you have cancer like Brielle's mom did?'

'I need peace;' I say, closing my eyes. 'I need to replenish myself with peace.'

'Well - then what are we eating for dinner?'

I open my eyes. That is right. It is Monday. I oversee dinner on Mondays now.

Ugh; Margot, where are you? It is dark already; there's not enough time to defrost anything. Mondays should be pizza nights. I eye her. 'Do you have any money?'

We both get an allowance- Kellie gets five dollars a week and I get twenty, but Kellie always has more money than me. She saves everything like a wily squirrel. I do not know where she keeps it because she locks the door whenever she goes to take any out of her stash.

-And-

She will lend it, but she charges interest. Margot has a credit card that she is allowed to use for groceries and gas, but she took that with her. I should ask Daddy about getting me one too; now that I am the oldest sister.

'Why do you need money?'

'Because I want to order a pizza for dinner.' Kellie opens her mouth to negotiate; but before she can get a word in, I say, 'Daddy will pay you back

when he gets home; so, do not even think about charging me interest. The pizzas for you; too, you know. Twenty oughts to do it.'

Kellie crosses her arms. 'I will give you the money, but first; you must tell me about that boy from this morning. Your boyfriend.'

I groan. 'What do you want to know?'

'I want to know how you got together.'

'We used to be friends back in middle school; remember? We would all hang out in Pearce's treehouse sometimes.' Kellie gives me a blank shrug. 'Well; remember that day I got in a car accident?' Kellie nods. 'Well; Marcel was driving by, and he stopped and helped me. And we just - reconnected. It was fate.' This is good practice, telling Kellie this story. I will tell Chris the same story tonight.

'That is, it? That is the whole story?'

'Hey; that's a fairly delightful story;' I say. 'I mean; a car accident is overly dramatic; plus, our history together.'

Kellie just says; 'Hmm;' and she leaves it at that.

We have sausage and mushroom pizza for dinner, and when I broach the idea of Pizza Mondays; Daddy is quick to agree. He is remembering my mac and cheese.

It is a relief that Kellie spends most of dinner talking about her field trip and all I must do is chew on my pizza. I am still thinking about what Manda said and wondering if this was not such a clever idea.

When Kellie pauses to inhale her slice; Daddy turns to me and says, 'Did anything interesting happen to you today?'

I swallow my mouthful of pizza. 'Um - not really.'

Later that night I fixed myself a bubble bath and soaked in the tub for so long Kellie bangs on the door twice to check if I had fallen asleep. Once I did.

I had just drifted off when my phone buzzed. It is Chris. I hit ignore, but then it keeps buzzing, and buzzing, and buzzing. I finally just picked it up.

'Is it true?' She screams.

I held the phone away from my ear. 'Yes.'

'Oh my god. Tell me everything.'

'Tomorrow; Chris. I will tell you everything tomorrow. Good night.'

'Wait-'

'Night!'

THAT FRIDAY I GO TO my first ever football game. I have never had even the tiniest bit of interest in it before, and I still do not. I am sitting high in the stands with Marcel and his friends, and as far as I can tell, there is not a lot to see. It just seems like a lot of waiting and huddling and not a lot of action. Nothing at all like football games in the movies and on TV shows.

By nine-thirty the game's over, I hope, and I am yawning into my coat when Marcel suddenly throws his arm around me. I nearly choked on my yawn.

Down below, Genevieve is cheering with the rest of the squad. She is shimmying and shaking her pom-poms. She looks up in the stands, and when she sees us; she stops for just a half-second before launching into a new cheer; eyes blazing.

I glance at Marcel, who has a satisfied smirk on. When Genevieve's back on the sidelines, he drops his arm and suddenly seems to remember I am there. He says, 'Eli's having people over tonight. Want to go?'

I do not even know who Eli is. I yawn again; a big one for the show. 'Um - I am tired. So - no. No; thank you. Can you just drop me off on the way there?'

Marcel gives me a look, but he does not argue.

On the way home, we pass by the diner and Marcel suddenly says; 'I am hungry. Do you want to stop and get something?' Pointedly he adds; 'Or are you too tired?'

I ignore the dig and say, 'Sure; I can eat.'

So, Marcel turns the car around and we go to dinner. We get a booth up front.

Whenever I used to come here with Margot and Josh, we would always sit in the back near the jukebox so we could put coins in. Half the time the jukebox was broken, but we still liked sitting near it. It is weird to be here without them. We have so many traditions here.

The three of us would get two grilled-cheese sandwiches and cut them up into squares, and we would order a bowl of tomato soup to dip the squares in, and then Josh and I would share a waffle with extra whipped cream for dessert and Margot would have a bowl of tapioca pudding. Gross; I know. I am sure only grandmas like tapioca pudding.

Our server is Kelly, who is a student at the college. She was gone all summer, and now she is back. She eyes Marcel as she sits down in our waters. 'Where are your friends tonight?' she asked me.

I say, 'Margot's left for Scotland, and Josh - isn't here.' Which Marcel rolls his eyes at.

Then Marcel orders blueberry pancakes and bacon and scrambled eggs. I got grilled cheese with fries on the side and a black cherry soda.

When Kelly leaves to put in our orders; I ask him; 'Why do you hate Josh so much?'

'I don't hate him;' Marcel scoffs. 'I barely know the guy.'

'Well; you certainly don't like him.'

Marcel scowls at me. 'What is to like? That kid turned me in once for cheating in seventh grade.'

Did Marcel cheat? My stomach twists a little. 'What kind of cheating was it? Like homework?'

'No; a Spanish test. I wrote down the answers in my calculator, and Josh freaking told me. Who does that?'

I search his face for some sign of embarrassment or shame at having cheated, but I do not see even an iota. 'What are you so high and mighty for? You are the one who cheated!'

'It was seventh grade!'

'Well; do you still cheat?'

'No. Hardly ever. I mean; I have.' He frowns at me. 'Would you quit looking at me like that?'

'Like what?'

‘With judged eyes. Look; I am going to school on a lacrosse scholarship anyway; so, what does it matter?’

I have a sudden revelation. I lower my voice and say, ‘Wait - can you read?’

He bursts out laughing. ‘Yes; I can read! Geez; Lara Jean. Not everything has a story behind it; okay? I am just lazy.’ He snorts. ‘Can I read it? I have written you multiple notes! You are hilarious.’

I can feel my face get flushed. ‘It wasn’t that funny.’ I squinted at him. ‘Is everything a joke to you?’

‘Not everything; but most things; sure.’

I dropped my chin. ‘Then maybe that’s a character flaw that you should work on;’ I say.

‘Because some things are serious, and they should be taken seriously. Sorry if you think that is me being judged.’

‘Yup; that is judged. You are judged in general. That is a character flaw that you should work on. You need to learn how to kick back and have fun.’

I am listing off all the ways I have fun- biking (which I hate;) baking; reading; I consider saying knitting, but I am sure he will only make fun of me- when Kelly drops off our food and I stop so I can bite into my grilled cheese while it is still oozy.

Marcel steals one of my French fries. ‘So- who else?’ ‘Who else what?’ With his mouth full, he says, ‘Who else got letters?’

‘Um; that’s private.’ I shake my head at him; like Wow; how rude.

‘What? I am simply curious.’ Marcel dips another fry into my little ramekin of ketchup.

Smirking: he says, ‘Come on; do not be shy. You can tell me. I know I am number one. But I want to hear who else cut it.’

He is practically flexing; he is so sure of himself. Fine; if he wants to know so bad; I will tell him. ‘Josh; you- ’

‘Obviously...’

‘Kenny...’

Marcel snorts. 'Kenny? Who is he?'

I prop my elbows up on the table and rest my chin on my hands. 'A boy I met at church camp. He was the best swimmer on the whole boys' side. He saved a drowning kid once. He swam out to the middle of the lake before the lifeguards even noticed anything was wrong.'

'So- what'd he says- when he got the letter?'

'Nothing. It was sent back to the sender.'

'Okay; who's next?'

I take a bite of a sandwich. 'Lucas Krapf.'

'He's gay;' Marcel says.

'He's not gay!'

'Dude quit dreaming. The kid is gay. He wore an ascot to school yesterday.'

'I am sure he was wearing it ironically. Besides, wearing an ascot does not make someone gay.' I give him a look like Wow; so homophobic.

'Hey; don't give me that look;' the objects. 'My favorite uncle's gay as hell.'

I bet you fifty dollars that if I showed my uncle Eddie a picture of Lucas; he would confirm it in half a second.'

'Just because Lucas appreciates fashion; that doesn't make him gay.'

Marcel opens his mouth to argue but I lift a hand to quiet him. 'All it means is he is more of a city guy amid all this-this boring suburbia. I bet you he ends up going to NYU or some other place in New York. He could be a TV actor. He has that look; you know. Svelte with fine-boned features. Overly sensitive features. He looks like - like an angel.'

'So- what did Angel Boy say about the letter; then?'

'Nothing - I'm sure because he's a gentleman and didn't want to embarrass me by bringing it up.' I give him a meaningful look. Unlike some people, this is what I am saying with my eyes.

Marcel rolls his eyes. 'All right; all right. Whatever; I do not care.' He leans back in his seat and stretches his arm out on the back of the empty seat next to him.

'That is only four. Who is the fifth?'

I am surprised he has been keeping count. 'John Ambrose McLaren.'

Marcel's eyes widened. 'McClaren? When did you like him?'

'Eighth grade.'

'I thought you liked me in eighth grade!'

'There may have been a little bit of overlap;' I admit. Stirring my straw; I say, 'There was this one time; in the gym - he and I had to pick up all the soccer balls, and it started to rain -' I sigh. 'It was probably the most romantic thing that ever happened to me.'

'What is it with girls and rain?' Marcel wanders.

'I don't know - I guess maybe because everything feels more dramatic in the rain;' I say with a shrug.

'Did anything happen with you two; or were you just standing out in the rain picking up soccer balls?'

'You wouldn't understand.' Someone like Marcel could never understand. Marcel rolls his eyes. 'So did McLaren's letter get sent to his old house?' he prompts.

'I think so. I never heard anything back from him.' I take a long sip of my soda.

'Why do you sound so sad about it?'

'I'm not!'

I am a little. Besides Josh, John Ambrose McLaren matters the most to me of all the boys I have loved. There was just something so sweet about him.

It was the promise of one day. I think John Ambrose McLaren must be The One That Got Away. Aloud I say, 'I mean; either he never got my letter, or he did, and-' I- shrug. 'I just always wondered how he turned out. If he is still the same. I bet he is.'

‘You know what; maybe he mentioned you once.’ Slowly he says, ‘Yeah; he did. He said he thought you were the prettiest girl in our grade. He said his one regret from middle school was not asking you to the eighth-grade formal.’

My whole body goes still- and I even stop breathing. ‘For real?’ I whisper.

Marcel bursts up laughing. ‘Dude! You are so gullible!’

My stomach squeezes. Blinking: I say, ‘That was mean. Why would you say that?’

Marcel stops laughing and says, ‘Hey; I am sorry. I was just kidding-’

I reach across the table and punch him in the shoulder; hard. ‘You’re a jerk.’

He rubs his shoulder and cries out; ‘Ow! That hurt!’

‘Well; you deserved it.’

‘Sorry;’ he says again. But there is still a trace of laughter in his eyes; so, I turn my head away from him. ‘Hey; come on. Do not be mad. Who knows? He did like you.

Let us call him and find out.’

My head snaps up. ‘You have his phone number? You have John Ambrose McLaren’s number?’

Marcel pulls out his cell phone. ‘Sure. Let us call him right now.’

‘No!’ I tried to grab his phone away from him, but he was too quick. He holds his phone above my head, and I cannot reach him. ‘Don’t you dare call him!’

‘Why not? I thought you were so curious about whatever happened to him.’ I shake my head fervently.

‘What are you so afraid of? That he does not remember you?’ Something changes in his face; some dawning realization about me. ‘Or that he does?’

I shake my head...

‘That’s it.’ Marcel nods to himself; he tips back in his chair; his hands linked around his head.

I do not like the way he looks at me. Like he thinks he has figured me out. I held my palm out to him. ‘Give me your phone.’

Marcel’s jaw drops. ‘You are going to call him? Right now?’

I like that I have surprised him. It makes me feel like I have won something back... I think throwing Marcel off guard could be a fun hobby for me. In a commanding voice, I’ve only- ever used Kellie; I say, ‘Just give me your phone.’ Marcel hands me his phone, and I copy John’s number into mine. ‘I’ll call him when I feel like it; not because you feel like it.’

Marcel gives me a look of grudging respect. Of course- I am never going to call John, but Marcel K. does not need to know that.

That night: I am lying in bed still thinking about John. It is fun to think of the what-if. Scary; but fun. It is like; I thought this door was closed before, but here it is open just the tiniest crack. What if? What would that be like; me and John Ambrose McClaren?

If I close my eyes; I can almost picture it.

MARGOT AND I ARE ON the phone; it is Saturday afternoon here and Saturday night there.

‘Have you lined up for an internship for the spring?’

‘Not yet-’

Margot lets out a sigh. ‘I thought you were going to try and do something at Montpelier. I know they need help in the archives... Do you want me to call Donna for you?’

Margot did an internship at Montpelier for two summers and she loved it.

She was there for some important dig where they found a shard of Dolley Madison’s China plate, and you would have thought they found diamonds or a dinosaur bone. Everybody loves Margot over there. When she left, they gave her a plaque for all her challenging work.

Daddy hung it up in the living room.

‘Montpelier’s too far of a drive,’ I say.

‘What about volunteering at the hospital?’ she suggests. ‘You could get a ride with Daddy on the days you have to go in.’

‘You know I don’t like the hospital.’ ‘Then the library! You like the library.’

‘I’ve already filled out an application;’ I lied.

‘Have you really?’

‘Or I was just about to...’

‘I should not have to push you to want things. You should want them for yourself. You need to take the initiative. I am not always going to be beside you to push you.’

‘I know that...’

‘I mean; do you realize how important this year is, Lara Jean? It is kind of everything.

You do not get a do-over- this is the junior year.’

I can feel tears and panic building up inside me. If she asks me another question; it will be too much, and I will cry.

‘Hello...?’ I speak.

‘I’m still here.’ My voice comes out tiny, and I know Margot knows how close I am to crying.

She pauses... ‘Look; you still have time; okay? I just do not want you to wait too long and have all the good placements go to other people; I am just worried about you is all. But everything is fine; you are still okay.’

‘Okay.’ Even just that one little word is an effort.

‘How’s everything else?’

I started this conversation wishing I could tell her about Marcel and everything that has been going on with me, but now I am just feeling relieved that there are all these miles between us, and she cannot see what I am up to. ‘Everything’s good;’ I say.

‘How’s Josh? Have you talked to him lately?’

‘Not really;’ I say. Which I have not. I have been so busy with Marcel that I have not had a chance.

KELLIE AND I ARE ON the front steps. She is drinking her Korean yogurt drink and I am working on that scarf for Margot while I wait for Marcel. Kellie’s waiting for Daddy to come out. He is dropping her off at school today.

Ms. Rossinchild has not come outside yet. She is sick today or she is running even later than usual.

We have our eyes locked on her front door when a minivan drives down our street and slows in front of our house. I squinted my eyes. It is Marcel.

Driving a tan minivan. He ducks his head out the window. ‘Are you coming or not?’

‘Why are you driving that?’ Kellie calls out.

‘Never mind that; Katherine;’ Marcel calls back. ‘Just get in...’

Kellie and I look at each other. ‘Me too?’ Kellie asks me.

I shrug. Then I lean back and open the front door and yell out; ‘Kellie’s getting a ride with me; Daddy!’

‘Okay!’ he yells back.

We stand up, but just then Ms. Rossinchild comes dashing out of the house in her navy-blue suit; briefcase in one hand; coffee in the other. Kellie and I look at each other gleefully. ‘Five; four; three-’

‘Damn it...!!!’

Giggling: we hurl ourselves toward Marcel’s minivan. I hop into the passenger seat and Kellie climbs into the back. ‘What were you guys laughing about?’ He asks.

I am about to tell him when Josh walks out of his house. He stops and stares at us for a second before the waves. I wave back and Kellie hangs her head out the window and yells.

‘Hi; Josh...!’

‘What up;’ Marcel calls out; leaning over me.

‘Hey;’ Josh says back. Then he gets in his car.

Marcel pokes me in the side and grins and puts the car in reverse. 'Tell me why you guys were laughing.'

Clicking on my seat belt, I say, 'At least once a week; Ms. Rossinchild runs out to her car and spills hot coffee all over herself.'

Kellie pipes up; 'It's the funniest thing in the world.'

Marcel snorts. 'You guys are sadistic.'

'What's sadistic?' Kellie wants to know. She puts her head between us.

I push her back and say, 'Put your seatbelt on.'

Marcel puts the car in reverse. 'It means seeing other people in pain makes you happy.'

'Oh.' She repeats it to herself softly. 'Sadistic.'

'Don't teach her weird stuff,' I say.

'I like weird stuff,' Kellie protests.

Marcel says, 'See? The kid likes weird stuff.' Without turning around, he lifts his hand for a high five and Kellie leans forward and slaps it heartily. 'Hey; gimme a sip of whatever it is you're drinking back there.'

'It's almost gone; so, you can have the rest,' she says.

Kellie hands it over, and Marcel tips back the plastic container in his mouth.

'This is good,' he says.

'It's from the Korean grocery store,' Kellie tells him. 'They come in a pack, and you can put them in the freezer and if you pack it for lunch; it'll be icy and cold when you drink it.'

'Sounds good to me. Lara Jean, bring me one of these tomorrow mornings; will you...?'

For services rendered.'

I shoot him a dirty look and Marcel says, 'I mean the rides! Geez.'

'I'll bring you one; Marcel,' Kellie says.

'That's my girl.'

'As long as you give me a ride to school tomorrow; too;' Kellie finishes, and Marcel hoots.

BEFORE THE FOURTH PERIOD; IM'S AT my locker; trying to refine my milkmaid braid in the little mirror hanging from the door.

'Lara Jean?'

'Yes?'

I peek around the door, and it is Lucas Krapf, wearing a thin V-neck sweater in brilliant blue and stone-colored khakis. 'I've had this for a while now - I wasn't going to say anything, but then I thought maybe you'd want it back.' He put a pink envelope in my hand. It is my letter. So, Lucas got his too.

I drop it into my locker; make a yikes face at myself in the mirror, and then close the door. 'So; you're probably wondering what this is all about;' I begin...

-And-

Then, I immediately falter. 'It's um; well; I wrote it a long time ago, and-'

'You don't have to explain.' 'Really? You are not curious?'

'No. It was just nice to get a letter like that. I was honored.'

I let out a relieved sigh and sag against my locker. Why is Lucas Krapf just so exactly right? He knows how to say the perfect thing.

And then Lucas gives me a half grimace, half-smile. 'But the thing is-'

He lowers his voice. 'You know I'm gay; right?'

'Oh; right; totally;' I say, trying not to sound disappointed. 'No; I knew.' So- Marcel was right.

Lucas smiles. 'You're so cute;' he says, and I perk up again. Then he says, 'Listen; can you not tell anybody; though? I mean; I am out, but I am not out-out yet. You know what I mean?'

'Totally;' I say, super confident.

'For instance; my mom knows but my dad only knows. I have not outright told him.'

'Got it...!'

'I just let people believe what they please. I do not feel like it is my responsibility to quantify myself for them. I mean; you get what I am talking about. As a biracial person, I am sure people are always asking you what race you are; right?'

I have not thought of it that way before; but yes- yes- yes! Lucas just gets it.

'Exactly. It is like; why do you need to know?'

'Exactly.'

We smile at each other, and I feel that wonderful sensation of being known by someone. We walk together in the same direction; he has a Mandarin class and I have French...

At one point he asks me about Marcel, and I am tempted to tell him the truth because I feel so close to him. But Marcel and I made that pact- we explicitly said we would never tell anyone. I do not want to be the one to break it. So-o when Lucas says, 'Hey; so, what's the deal with you and-?' I just shrug and give him an enigmatic smile.

The Slit Kiss

'It is crazy; right? Because he is so -' I search for the exact right word, but I cannot think of it. 'I mean; he could play the part of a handsome guy in a movie.' Hastily I add; 'So could you; though. You would play the guy the girl should pick.'

Lucas laughs, but I can tell he likes it.

Dear Lucas: I have never met a boy with manners as good as yours. You ought to have a British accent. At homecoming, you wore a cravat, and it suited you so well that I think you could wear one all the time and get away with it.

Oh Lucas! I wish I knew what kind of girls you liked. As far as I can tell, you have not dated anyone - unless you have a girlfriend at another school. You are just so mysterious. I hardly know a thing about you. The things I know are so unsubstantial; so unsatisfying; like that, you eat a chicken sandwich every day at lunch, and you are on the golf team.

I guess the one remotely real thing I know about you is you are a good writer, which must mean you have deep reserves of emotion. Like that short story you wrote in creative writing about the poisoned well, and it was from a six-year-old boy's perspective. It was so sensitive; so keen! That story made me feel like I knew you at least a little bit. But I do not know you, and I wish I did.

You are incredibly special. You are one of the most special people at our school, and I wish more people knew that about you. Or I do not because sometimes it is nice to be the only one who knows something.

Love; Lara Jean-

AFTER SCHOOL; CHRIS, and Aire hung out in my room. She is in trouble with her mom for staying out all night; so, she is hiding out over here until her mom leaves for the book club.

We are sharing a big bag of Kellie's Pirate Booty, which I am going to have to replace because she will complain if it is missing from her lunch on Monday.

Chris stuffs a handful of Pirate Booty puffs in her mouth. 'Just tell me, Lara Jean. How far have you guys gone?'

I choke. 'We have gone nowhere! And we have no plans to go anywhere shortly.' Or ever...

'Seriously? Not even over-the-bra action? A quick swipe across your chest?'

'No! I told you; my sister and I are not like that.'

Chris snorts... 'Are you joking me...? Of course, Margot and Josh have had sex. Quit being so naive; Lara Jean.'

'This isn't me being naive,' I tell her. 'I know that he and Margot haven't done it.' 'How? How do you know 'for a fact? I would love to hear this.'

'I'm not telling you.' If I tell Chris; she will only laugh more. She does not understand; she only has a little brother. She does not know how it is with her sisters.

Margot and I made a pact back in middle school.

We swore we would not have sex until we were married, or we were really; really in love and at least twenty-one. Margot might be really; really in

love, but she is not married, and she is not twenty-one... She would never go back on her word. With sisters a pact is everything.

‘No; I’d love to know.’ Chris has that hungry glint in her eyes, and I know she is just getting warmed up.

‘You just want to make fun of it, and I’m not going to let you,’ I say.

Chris rolls her eyes. ‘Fine. But there is no way they have not boned.’

I think Chris talks like that on purpose to get a reaction from me. She loves a reaction; so, I am careful not to give her one. I calmly say; ‘Can you please stop talking about my sister and Josh having sex. You know I do not like it.’

Chris takes a permanent marker out of her bag and starts to color in her thumbnail.

‘You need to stop being such a scaredy-cat. Seriously, you have built it up in your head to be this huge; life-changing moment; but it was done in under five, and it is not even the best part.’

I know she is waiting for me to ask what the best part is, and I am curious; but I ignore her and say, ‘permanent marker is toxic for your nails;’ to which she shakes her head at me like I am a lost cause.

I wonder, though - what would it be like. To be that close to a boy and have him see all of you, no holding back. Would it be scary only for a second or two?

Or would it be scary the whole time? What if I did not like it at all? Or what if I liked it too much? It is a lot to think about.

‘DO YOU THINK- IF A- a guy and a girl have been dating for a long time; they’ve automatically had sex?’ I asked Marcel. We are sitting on the floor of the library; our backs against the wall of the reference section nobody ever goes to. It is after school; the library’s empty, and we are doing homework. Marcel gets Cs and Ds in chemistry; so, I have been helping him study.

Marcel looks up from his chem- book; suddenly interested. He tosses the book aside and says, ‘I need more information. How long have they been dating?’

‘A long time. Like two years; something like that.’

‘How old are they...? Our age...?’

‘About...’

...?...

‘Then most likely but not necessarily. It depends on the girl and the guy. But if I had to put money into it; yes.’

‘But the girl’s not like that. The guy is not either.’

‘Who are we talking about here?’

‘That’s a secret.’ I hesitate, and then say; ‘Chris thinks there is no way they have not.’

She says it is impossible.’

Marcel snorts. ‘Why are you going to her for advice? That girl is a train wreck.’

‘She is not a train wreck...!’

He gives me a look. ‘Shaddyman year she got wasted on Four Loko and she climbed up on Tyler Boylan’s roof and did a striptease.’

‘Were you there?’ I demand. ‘Did you see it with your own two eyes?’

‘Damn straight. Fished her clothes out of the pool like the gentleman I am.’

I blow out my cheeks. ‘Well; Chris never mentioned that story to me; so, like- I cannot speak to that. Besides, did not they ban Four Loko or whatever it is called?’

‘They still make it, but a shitty watered-down version. You can dump Five-Hour Energy in it to get the same effect...’ I shudder, which makes Marcel smile. ‘What do you and Chris even talk about?’ he asks. ‘You have nothing in common.’

‘What do we talk about?’ I counter...

Marcel laughs. ‘Point taken.’ He pushes away from the wall and puts his head in my lap, and I go completely still.

I try to make my voice sound normal as I say, ‘You’re in a really strange mood today.’

He raises an eyebrow at me. 'What kind of mood am I in?' Marcel sure loves to hear about himself. Normally, I do not mind, but today I am not in the mood to oblige him. He already has too many people in his life telling him how great he is.

'The obnoxious kind;' I say, and he laughs.

'I'm sleepy.' He closes his eyes and snuggles at me. 'Tell me a bedtime story; Covey.'

'Don't flirt;' I tell him...

His eyes fly open. 'I wasn't!'

'Yes; you were. You flirt with everyone. It is like you cannot help yourself.'

'Well; I don't ever flirt with you.' Marcel sits back up and checks his phone, and suddenly I am wishing I did not say anything at all...

I am IN FRENCH CLASS; LOOKING Out the window as I am wont to do, and that is when I see Josh walking toward the bleachers by the track. He is carrying his lunch, and he is alone. Why is he eating alone? He has his comic-book group; he has Jersey Mike.

But I guess he and Jersey Mike did not hang out so much last year. Josh was always with Margot and me. The trio. And now we are not even a duo, and he is all alone. Part of it is Margot's fault for leaving, but I can see my part in it too; if I had never started liking him; I would not have had to make up this whole Marcel. story. I could just be his good friend Lara Jean like always.

Therefore, Mommy told Margot not to go to college with a boyfriend. When you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend; you only want to be with that person, and you forget about everybody else, and then when the two of you break up; you have lost all your friends. They were off doing fun stuff without you.

All I can say is Josh sure is a lonely figure eating his sandwich on the very top bleacher.

I took the bus home from school because Marcel had to leave early for a lacrosse game with his club team. I am in front of the house; taking the mail out of our mailbox when Josh pulls into his driveway. 'Hey!' he calls out. He climbs out of his car and jogs over to me; his backpack slung over his shoulder.

‘I saw you on the bus;’ he says. ‘I waved, but you were doing your daydreaming thing. So how long is your car going to be in the shop?’

‘I do not know. It keeps changing. They had to order apart from; like; Indiana.’

Josh gives me a knowing look. ‘So, you’re secretly relieved; right?’

‘No! Why would I be relieved?’

‘Come on. I know you. You hate driving. You are glad to have the excuse not to drive.’

I started to protest; but then I stopped. There is no use. Josh knows me too well.

‘Well; maybe I’m a teeny-tiny bit relieved.’

‘If you ever need a ride; you know you can call me.’

I nod. I do know that. I would not call him for myself; but I would for Kellie; in an emergency.

‘I mean; I know you have - now, but I am right next door. It is way more convenient for me to give you a ride to a school than him. I mean; it is more environmentally responsible.’ I do not say anything, and Josh scratches the back of his neck.

‘I want to say something to you, but I feel weird bringing it up. Which is also weird; because we have always been able to talk to each other.’

‘We can still talk to each other;’ I say. ‘Nothing’s changed.’ That is the biggest lie I have ever told him, even bigger than the lie about my so-called dead twin Marcella. Until a couple of years ago; Josh thought I had a twin sister named Marcella who died of leukemia.

‘Okay. I feel like - I feel like you have been avoiding me ever since-’

He is going to say it. He is going to say it. I look down at the ground.

‘Ever since Margot broke up with me.’

My head snaps up. Is that what he thinks? That I am avoiding him because of Margot...?

Did my letter make that little of an impact? I try to keep my face still and expressionless when I say, 'I have not been avoiding you. I have just been busy.'

'With- I know. You and I have known each other for a long time.

You are one of my best friends, Lara Jean. I do not want to lose you; too.'

It is the 'too' that is the sticking point... The 'too' is what stops me in my tracks. It sticks in my craw. Because if he had not said 'too,' it would be about me and him. Not about me and him and Margot.

'That letter you wrote-'

Too late... I do not want to talk about the letter anymore. Before he can say another word; I say, 'I'll always be your friend; Joshy.' And then I smile at him, and it takes a lot of effort. It takes so much effort. But if I do not smile, I will cry.

Josh nods. 'Okay. Good. So - so can we spend time together again?'

'Sure...'

Josh reaches out and chucks my chin. 'So; can I give you a ride to school tomorrow...?'

'Okay;' I say. Because was not that kind of the whole point of this? To be able to hang out with Josh again without that letter hanging over our heads. To just be his good friend Lara Jean again?

After dinner, I teach Kellie how to do laundry. She resists me at first, but I tell her that this is a job we are all sharing from now on; so-o she would better just accept it.

'When the buzzer goes off; that means it's done, and you have to fold it right away or it'll get wrinkled.'

To both of our surprise, Kellie likes doing laundry. Mostly because she can sit in front of the TV and fold and watch her shows in peace.

'Next time I'll teach you how to iron.'

'Ironing; too? Who am I; Cinderella?'

I ignore her. ‘You will be good at ironing. You like precision and clean lines.

You will be better at it than me.’

This piqued her interest. ‘Yeah; maybe. Your stuff always looks wrinkled no matter what.’

After we finish the laundry, Kellie and I wash up in the bathroom we share.

There are two sinks; Margot had the one on the left and Kellie and I used to fight over who the sink on the right belonged to. It is hers now...

Kellie’s brushing her teeth and I am putting on a cucumber-aloe face mask; when Kellie says to me; ‘Do you think if I asked; Marcel would take us to McDonald’s tomorrow on the way to school?’

I rub another dollop of green face mask onto my cheeks. ‘I do not want you getting used to Marcel giving us rides. You are taking the bus from now on; okay?’

Kellie pouts. ‘Why?’

‘Because. Besides, Marcel’s not giving me a ride tomorrow; Josh is.’

‘But won’t Marcel be mad?’

My face is getting tight from the mask drying. Through clenched teeth, I say; ‘Nah. He’s not the jealous type.’

‘Then who’s the jealous type?’

I do not have a satisfactory answer for that. Who is the jealous type? I am mulling this over when Kellie giggles at me in the mirror and says, ‘You look like a zombie.’

I hold my hands out to her face and she ducks away. In my best zombie voice, I say, ‘I want to eat your brains.’

Kellie runs away, screaming.

When I am back in my room, I text Marcel that I do not need a ride to school tomorrow. I did not tell him Josh is giving me a ride. Just in case.

TODAY’S NOTE FROM Marcel SAYS, Tart and Tangy after school?

He is drawn into two boxes; a yes or a no. I check yes and drop the note in his locker.

After school ends, I meet Marcel in his car, and we caravan with his lacrosse friends to Tart and Tangy. I ordered an original frozen yogurt with Capping Crunch and strawberries and kiwi and pineapple, and Marcel gets key lime with crushed-up Oreos. I pulled out my wallet to pay for my yogurt, but Marcel stopped me. He winks at me and says, 'I got this.' I whisper; 'I thought you weren't ever paying for anything.'

'My boys are here. I cannot look like a cheap ass in front of my boys.' Then he puts his arm around me and says loudly; 'For as long as you're my girl; you don't pay for frozen yogurt.'

I roll my eyes, but I am not going to say no to free frozen yogurt. No boy has ever paid for me before. I could get used to this kind of nice treatment...

I was bracing myself to see Genevieve here, but she does not show. I think Marcel's wondering too because he keeps his eyes on the door. With Genevieve, I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. So far- she has been eerily; disturbingly quiet. She is hardly ever in the cafeteria during lunch because she and Emily Nussbaum have been eating off-campus, and when I see her in the hallways; she smiles at me without showing her teeth; which is somehow more menacing.

When is she going to strike back against me? When will I have my Jamila Singh moment? Chris says Genevieve's too obsessed with her college boyfriend to care about me and Marcel, but I do not believe it. I have seen the way she looks at him.

Like he is hers.

The boys put a few tables together and we took over the place. It is just like at the lunch table; with them being loud; talking about the football game coming up on

Friday. I do not think I can say two words. I do not have anything to add. I just eat my free frozen yogurt and enjoy the fact that I am not at home organizing my shoe closet or watching the Golf Channel with my dad.

Continued- 1

We are walking to our cars when Gabe says, 'Hey; Lara Jean; did you know that if you say your name fast; it sounds like Large? Try it! Lara Jean.'

Dutifully I repeat; 'Lara Jean. Largy. It sounds more like Largy; not Large.'

Gabe nods to himself and announces; 'I am going to start calling you Large.'

You are so little it is funny. Right? Like those big guys who go by the name Tiny?'

I shrug. 'Sure.'

Gabe turns to Darrell. 'She's so little she could be our mascot.'

'Hey; I'm not that small;' I protest.

'How tall are you?' Darrell asks me.

'Five two;' I fib. It is more like five and a quarter.

Tossing his spoon in the trash; Gabe says, 'You're so little you could fit in my pocket!'

All the guys laugh. Marcel's smiling in a bemused way. Then Gabe suddenly grabs me and throws me over his shoulder like I am a kid, and he is, my dad.

'Gabe! Put me down!' I shriek, kicking my legs and pounding on his chest.

He starts spinning around in a circle, and all the guys are cracking up. 'I am going to adopt you; Large! You are going to be my pet. I will put you in my old hamster cage!'

I am giggling so hard I cannot catch my breath and I am starting to feel dizzy.

'Put me down!'

'Put her down; man;' Marcel says, but he is laughing too.

Gabe runs toward somebody's pickup truck and sets me down in the back.

'Get me out of here!' I yell. Gabe's already running away. All the guys start getting into their cars.

'Bye; Large!' they call out. Marcel jogs over to me and extends his hand so I can hop down.

‘Your friends are crazy;’ I say, jumping onto the pavement...

‘They like you;’ he says.

‘Really?’

‘Sure... They used to hate when I would bring Gen places. They do not mind if you spend time together with us.’ Marcel slings his arm around me. ‘Come on; Large. I will take you home.’

As we walk to his car, I let my hair fall in my face; so, he does not see me smiling. It sure is nice being part of a group; feeling like I belong.

I VOLUNTEERED TO BAKE Six Dozen cupcakes for Kellie’s PTA bake sale. I did it because Margot’s done it for the past two years. Margot only ever did it because she did not want people to think Kellie’s family was not involved enough in PTA. She did brownies both times, but I signed up for cupcakes because I thought they would be a bigger hit. I bought a few various kinds of blue sprinkles, and I made little toothpick flags that say BLUE MOUNTAIN ACADEMY. I thought Kellie would have fun helping me decorate.

But now I am realizing Margot’s way was better; because with brownies; you just pour them into the pan; bake, and slice, and there you go. Cupcakes are a lot more work. You must scoop the perfect amount six dozen times, and then you must wait for them to cool, and then you are-e frosting and sprinkling.

I am measuring out my eighth cup of flour when the doorbell rings. ‘Kellie!’ I scream.

‘Get the door!’

It rings again. ‘Kellie!’

From upstairs she screams back; ‘I’m running an important experiment!’

I run to the door and fling it open without bothering to check who it is.

Marcel: He busts up laughing.

‘You have flour all over your face;’ he says, dusting off my cheeks with the backs of his hands.

I twist away from him and wipe my face with my apron. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘We are going to the game. Didn’t you read my note from yesterday?’

‘Oh; shoot. I had a test and I forgot.’ Marcel frowns and I add; ‘I can’t go anyway because I have to bake seventy-two cupcakes by tomorrow.’

‘On a Friday night?’

‘Well - yes.’

‘Is this for the PTA bake sale?’ Marcel brushes past me and starts taking off his sneakers. ‘You guys are a no-shoes house; right?’

‘Yeah;’ I say, surprised. ‘Is your mom making something too?’

‘Rice Krispie treats.’ Another way smarter choice than seventy-two cupcakes.

‘Sorry; you came over here for nothing. We can go to the game next Friday;’ I say, expecting him to put his shoes back on.

But he does not; he wanders into the kitchen and sits on a stool. Huh? ‘Your house looks the same as I remembered;’ he says, looking around. He points at the framed picture of me and Margot taking a bath when we were babies. ‘Cute.’

I can feel my cheeks burn. I go and turn the photo over. ‘When have you ever been to my house?’

‘Back in seventh grade. Remember how we would spend time together in your neighbor’s treehouse? I had to pee once, and you let me use your bathroom.’

‘Oh; yes;’ I say.

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 27

French Kiss

Part: 7

Kiss me Here

It is funny to see a boy other than Josh in our kitchen. I feel nervous for some reason.

‘How long is it going to take?’ he asks me, his hands in his pockets.

‘Hours, probably.’ I picked up the measuring cup again. I cannot remember what cup I was on.

Marcel groans. ‘Why can’t we just go to the store and buy some?’

I start measuring the flour that is in the bowl, separating it into piles.

‘Because do you think any of the other moms are buying cupcakes from Food Lion? How would that make Kitty look?’

‘Well, if it’s for Kitty, then Kitty should be helping.’ Marcel hops off the stool and comes up to me and slides his hands around my waist and tries to untie my apron strings.

‘Where is the kid?’

I stared at him. ‘What - are you doing?’

Marcel looks at me like I am a dummy. ‘I need an apron too if I am going to help. I am not trying to get my clothes all messed up.’

‘We’re not going to be done in time for the game,’ I tell him.

‘Then we’ll just go to the party after.’ Marcel shot me an incredulous look. ‘That was in the note I wrote to you today! God, why do I even bother?’

‘I was really busy today,’ I say meekly. I feel bad. He is following through on his end of the deal and faithfully writing me a note a day and I cannot even be bothered to read them. ‘I do not know if I can go to a party. I do not know if I am allowed to go out that late.’

‘Is your dad home? I will ask him.’

‘No, he is at the hospital. Besides, I cannot just leave Kitty here by herself.’ I picked up the measuring cup again.

‘Well, what time does he get home?’

‘I do not know. Late.’ Or like in the next hour. But Marcel will be long gone by then. ‘You should just go. I do not want to hold you up.’

Marcel groans. 'Covey. I need you. Gen has not said a word about us yet, which is the whole point of this. And - she might bring that dickhole she is dating.'

Marcel pushes out his lower lip. 'Come on. I came through for you with Josh, didn't I?'

'Yes,' I admit. 'But, Marcel, I have to make these cupcakes for the bake sale-'

Marcel stretches his arms out. 'Then I will help you. Just give me an apron.'

I backed away from him and started rummaging around for another apron. I found one with a cupcake print and handed it to him.

He makes a face and points at mine. 'I want the one you're wearing.'

'But it's mine!' It is red-and-white gingham with little brown bears; my grandma got it for me in Korea. 'I always bake in this. Just wear that one.'

Slowly Marcel shakes his head and holds out his hand. 'Give me yours. You owe me for not reading any of my notes.'

I untie the apron and hand it over. I turn around and go back to my measuring. 'You're a bigger baby than Kitty.'

'Just hurry up and give me a task.'

'Are you qualified, though? Because I only have exactly enough ingredients for six dozen cupcakes. I do not want to have to start over-.'

'I know how to bake!'

'Okay, then. Dump those sticks of butter into the mixing bowl.'

'And then?'

'And then when you're done, I'll give you your next task.'

Marcel rolls his eyes, but he does as he is told. 'So-o this is what you do on Friday nights?

Stay home and bake in your PJ's?'

'I do other stuff too,' I say, tying my hair into a tighter ponytail.

‘Like?’

I am still so flustered by Marcel’s sudden appearance that I cannot think.

‘Um, I go out.’

‘Where?’

‘God, I do not know! Quit interrogating me, Marcel.’ I blow my bangs out of my eyes. It is getting warm here. I might as well just turn off the oven, because. Marcel’s arrival has slowed down this entire process. At this rate, I will be up all night. ‘You made me lose my count on the flour. I am going to have to start over from scratch!’

‘Here, let me do it,’ Marcel says, coming up close behind me.

I jerk away from him. ‘No- no, I’ll do it,’ I say, and he shakes his head and tries to take the measuring cup from me, but I will not let go, and flour pours out of the cup and into the air. It dusts us both. Marcel starts cracking up and I let out an outraged shriek. ‘Marcel!’

He is laughing too hard to speak.

I cross my arms... ‘I’d better still have enough flour.’ ‘You look like a grandma,’ he says, still laughing.

‘Well, you look like a grandpa,’ I counter. I dump the flour in my mixing bowl back into the flour canister.

‘Actually, you’re a lot like my granny,’ Marcel says. ‘You hate cussing. You like to bake. You stay at home on Friday nights. Wow, I am dating my granny... gross.’

I start measuring again. One, two. ‘I don’t stay home every Friday night.’ Three...

‘I have never seen you out. You do not go to parties. We used to hang out back in the day.

Why would you stop hanging out?’

Four. ‘I - I do not know. Middle school was different.’ What does he want me to say?

That Genevieve decided I was not cool enough- so I got left behind?
Why is he so clueless?

‘I always wondered why you stopped hanging out with us.’

Was I on five or six? ‘Marcel! You made me lose my count again!’

‘I have that effect on women.’

I roll my eyes at him, and he grins back at me, but before he can say anything else, I yell, ‘Kitty! Get down here!’

‘I’m working-’

‘Marcel’s here!’ I know that will get her.

In five seconds flat, Kitty’s running into the kitchen. She skids to a stop, suddenly shy. ‘Why are you here?’ she asks him.

‘To pick up Lara Jean. Why aren’t you helping?’

‘I was running an experiment. Want to help me?’

I answered him. ‘Sure, he’ll help you.’ To Marcel, I say, ‘You are distracting me. Go help Kitty.’

‘I do not know if you want my help, Katherine. See, I am distracting to women. I make them lose their count.’ Marcel winks at her and I make a gagging sound. ‘Why don’t you stay down here and help us bake?’

‘Boring!’ Kitty turns tail and runs back up the stairs.

‘Don’t you dare try to sprinkle or frost when it’s all over!’ I yell. ‘You haven’t earned the right!’

I am creaming the butter and Marcel’s cracked eggs into a chipped salad bowl when my dad gets home. ‘Whose car is that out front?’ Daddy asks as he walks into the kitchen.

He stops short. ‘Hello,’ he says, surprised. He has a Chan’s Chinese Bistro bag in his hands.

‘Hey, Daddy,’ I say like it is perfectly normal that Marcel - is cooking in our kitchen. ‘You look tired.’

Marcel stands up straighter. ‘Hi, Dr. Covey.’

My dad sets the bag down on the kitchen table. ‘Oh, hello,’ he says, clearing his throat. ‘Nice to see you. You are Marcel K., right?’

‘Right.’

‘One of the old gangs,’ my dad says jovially, and I cringe. ‘What are you kids up to tonight?’

‘I’m baking cupcakes for Kitty’s PTA bake sale and Marcel’s helping,’ I say.

My dad nods. ‘Are you hungry, Marcel? I have plenty.’ He lifts the bag.

‘Shrimp lo mein, kung pao chicken.’

‘Actually, Lara Jean and I were going to stop by our friend’s party,’ Marcel says. ‘If that would be, okay? I will bring her back early.’

Before my dad could answer, I said to Marcel, ‘I told you I have to finish these cupcakes.’

‘Kitty and I will finish them,’ my dad interjects. ‘You two go to that birthday party.’

My stomach flips. ‘It is okay, Daddy. I must be the one to do them; I am decorating them specially.’

‘Kitty and I will figure it out. You can get changed. We will keep working on these cupcakes.’

I open and close my mouth like some trout. ‘All right, then.’ And I do not make a move, I just stand there, because I am afraid to leave the two of them alone together.

Marcel smiles at me broadly. ‘You heard the man. We have this covered.’

I think, do not act too confident, because then my dad will think you are arrogant.

There are certain outfits you have that make you feel good every time you wear them, and then there are outfits where you wore them too many times in a row because you- liked them so much, and now they just feel like garbage. I am looking at my closet now and everything looks like garbage. My anxiety is only compounded by the fact that I know- Gen will be wearing the exact right thing because she always wears the exact right thing.

And I must be wearing the right thing too. Marcel would not have come by and made such a point of going to this party if it were not important to him.

I pull on my jeans and try on different tops- a frilly peach one that suddenly looks prissy in my eyes, a long fuzzy sweater with a penguin on it that looks too kid-sh. I am stepping into a pair of gray shorts with black suspenders when someone knocks at my door. I freeze and grab a sweater to cover myself up.

'Lara Jean?' It is Marcel.

'Yes?'

'Are you almost ready?'

'! Just- just go downstairs. I will be down soon.'

He lets out an audible sigh. 'Okay. I am going to see what the kid's doing.'

When I hear his footsteps walking away, I scramble and try a cream polka dot blouse with the shorts-suspenders ensemble. It is cute, but is it too cute? Too much?

And should I wear black tights or black knee socks? Margot said I look Parisian in this outfit. Parisian is a good thing. It is sophisticated and romantic. I try on a beret, just to see the effect, and I immediately throw it off. Too much.

I wish Marcel had not snuck up on me with this. I need time to plan, to prepare. Though truthfully, if he had asked me ahead of time, I would have produced an excuse not to go. It is one thing to go to Tart and Tangy after school, but a party with all of Marcel's friends, not to mention Genevieve?

I hop around my room, searching for my over-the-knee socks, then searching for my strawberry lip pot that looks like a strawberry. Gosh, I need to clean my room. It is hard to find anything in this mess.

I run to Margot's room for her big grandpa cardigan, and I pass Kitty's open door, where I see Marcel and Kitty lying on the floor, working with her lab set. I root through Margot's sweater drawer, which is now T-shirts and shorts because she has taken most of her sweaters. No grandpa cardigan. But at the bottom of the drawer, there is an envelope.

A letter, from Josh.

I want to open it so badly. I know I should not.

Carefully, ever so carefully, I take out the letter and unfold it.

Dear Margot, you say we had to break up because you do not want to go to college with a boyfriend, and you want your freedom, and you do not want to be held back. But you know, and I know that is not the real reason. You broke up with me because we had sex and you feared getting close to me.

I stopped reading.

I cannot believe it. Chris was right- and I was wrong. Margot and Josh did have sex. It is like everything I thought I knew is the opposite. I thought I knew exactly who my sister was, but it turns out I do not know anything.

I hear Marcel calling my name. 'Lara Jean! Are you ready yet?'

Hastily I fold the letter up and put it back in the envelope. I put it back in the drawer and slammed the drawer shut. 'Coming!'

WE'RE STANDING AT THE FRONT door of Steve Bledell's mansion.

Steve's on the football team; he is mostly known for having a rich stepdad with his plane.

'Ready?' Marcel asks me.

I wipe my palms on my shorts. I wish I had had time to do something better for my hair.

'Not really.'

'Then let us talk strategy for a second. All you must do is act like you are in love with me. That should not be too hard.'

I roll my eyes. 'You're the vainest boy I've ever met.'

Marcel grins and shrugs. He has his hand on the doorknob, but then he stops. 'Hold on,' he says, and he pulls the hair tie out of my hair and tosses it into the yard.

'Hey!'

'It looks better down. Just trust me.' Marcel runs his fingers through my hair and fluffs it up, and I swat his hand away. Then he takes his phone out of his back pocket and he snaps a picture of me.

I give him a puzzled look, and he explains, 'In case Gen checks my phone.'

I watch as he sets the picture as his wallpaper.

'Can we do another one?' I do not like the way my hair looks.

'Nah, I like it. You look pretty.' He only said it so we could hurry up and go inside, but it makes me feel good.

Walking into this party with Marcel, I cannot help but feel a sudden rush of pride.

He is here with me. Or is it that I am here with him?

I see her as soon as we walk in- she is on the couch with her girls; they are all drinking from red Solo cups. No boyfriend in sight. She raises her eyebrows at me and whispers something to Emily Nussbaum. 'Heyyy, Lara Jean,' Emily calls out, crooking her finger at me. 'Come sit by us.'

I start to walk toward them, thinking Marcel is next to me, but he is not. He stopped saying hi to someone. I look at him with panicky eyes and he just gestures at me to keep going. He mouths, you are up.

Crossing the room alone wants to cross a continent, with Gen and her friends watching me. 'Hi, guys,' I say, and my voice comes out high-pitched and little-girlish.

There is no room for me on the couch, so I perch on an armrest like a bird on a telephone wire. I keep my eyes trained on Marcel's back; he is across the room with some guys from the lacrosse team. It must be nice to be him. So-o at ease, so comfortable with himself, knowing that people are waiting for him, like Marcel's here, now the party can get started. I look around the room, just to have something to do, and see Gabe and Darrell, and they wave at me very nicely, but they do not come over. It feels like everyone is waiting and watching, waiting, and watching to see what Genevieve will do.

I wish I had not come.

Emily leans forward. 'We're all dying to know - what's the story with you and-?'

I know she has been commissioned by Gen to ask. Gen's sipping her drink, casual as can be, but she is waiting for my answer. Is she drunk yet? I wonder. From everything I have heard and know about Gen, she is a mean

drunk. Not that I have ever personally experienced it, but I have heard things. There are stories.

I wet my lips. 'Whatever Marcel said - I guess that's the story.'

Emily waves this off like whatever Marcel says does not count. 'We want to hear it from you. I mean, it is just so surprising. How did this even happen?' She leans closer like we are girlfriends.

When I hesitate, when my eyes dart toward Genevieve, she smiles and rolls her eyes.

'It is okay, you can say, Lara Jean. Marcel and I are over. I do not know if he told you this, but I am the one who broke up with him, so.'

I nod... 'That's what he said.' That is not what he said, but it is what I already knew.

'So- when did you guys get together?' She tries to sound offhand, but I know my answer is important to her. She is trying to catch me in something.

'Pretty recently,' I say.

'How recently?' she presses.

I swallow... 'Right before school started,' I tell her. Isn't that what Marcel and I decided the story was going to be?

Genevieve's eyes go bright and my heart sinks. I have said the wrong thing, but it is too late. It is hard not to get caught up in her spell. She is the kind of person you want to like you. You know she can be cruel; you have seen her be cruel. But when her eyes are on you, and she is paying attention to you, you want it to last. Her beauty is part of it, but there is something more- something that draws you in. It is her transparency- everything she thinks or feels is written all over her face, and even if it were not, she would say it anyway, because she says what she thinks, without thinking first.

I can see why Marcel has loved her for so long.

'I think it's adorable,' Genevieve says, and then the girls start talking about some concert they are trying to get tickets for, and I just sit there, glad I do not have to talk- anymore, wondering how it is going with the cupcakes back at home. I hope Daddy does not overbake them. There is nothing worse than a dry cupcake.

The girls move on to talking about Halloween costumes, so I get up and go to the bathroom.

I come back to find Marcel sitting in a wingback leather armchair, drinking a beer, and talking to Gabe. There is nowhere for me to sit; my spot on the couch has been taken.

Now what?

I stand there for a second and then I go for it: I do what a girl in love with Marcel would do. I do what Genevieve would do. I march right in and plop down in his lap like it is my rightful place.

Marcel yelps in surprise. 'Hey,' he says, coughing on his beer.

'Hey,' I say. Then I tweak him once on the nose like I saw a girl do in a black-and-white movie.

Marcel shifts in his seat and gives me a look like he is trying not to laugh, and I get nervous- tweaking a boy on the nose is romantic, right? Then, out of the- corner of my- eye, I see Genevieve glaring at us. She whispers something to Emily and stalks out of the room.

Success!

Later I pour myself Cherry Coke and I see Genevieve and Marcel, talking in the kitchen. She is speaking to him in a low, urgent voice, and she reaches out and touches his arm. He tries to brush her hand away, but she does not let go.

I am so mesmerized I do not even notice when Lucas Krapf comes up to me, popping the cap off a bottle of Bud Light. 'Hey, Lara Jean.'

'Hi!' I am relieved to see a familiar face.

He stands next to me, our backs against the dining room wall. 'What are they fighting about?'

'Who even knows?' I speak. I smile a secret smile. Hopefully, it is about me, and Marcel will be happy our plan is finally working.

Lucas crooks his finger at me, so I will come closer. He whispers, 'Fighting is not a good sign, Lara Jean. It means you still care.' His breath smells like beer.

Hmm. Genevieve still cares. Marcel must too.

Lucas pats me on the head fondly. 'Just be careful.'

'Thank you,' I say.

Marcel stalks out of the kitchen and says, 'Are you ready to go?' He does not wait for me to answer him; he just starts walking, his shoulders stiff.

I give Lucas a shrug. 'See you on Monday, Lucas!' Then I scurry after Marcel.

He is still mad; I can tell he jerks the keys into the ignition. 'God, she makes me crazy!' He is so keyed up energy is vibrating off him in waves.

'What did you say to her?'

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. 'She asked me when we got together. I told her just before school started.'

Marcel does a full-body groan. 'We hooked up that first weekend.'

'But - you guys have broken up already.'

'Yeah, well.' Marcel shrugs. 'Whatever. What has been done is done.'

Relieved, I click on my seat belt and kick my shoes off. 'What were you two fighting about tonight, anyway?'

'Do not worry about it. You did an excellent job. She is so jealous it is killing her.'

'Yay,' I say. Just if she does not kill me.

We drive through the night in silence. Then I ask, 'Marcel - how did you know you loved Genevieve?'

'God, Lara Jean. Why do you have to ask those kinds of questions?'

'Because I'm a naturally curious person.' I flip down his mirror and start braiding the top of my hair. 'And the question you should be asking yourself is, why are you so afraid to answer those kinds of questions?'

'I'm not afraid!'

'Then why won't you answer the question?'

Marcel goes silent, and I am sure he is not going to answer, but then, after a long pause where my question just hangs in the air, he says, 'I do not

know if I ever loved Genevieve. How would I even know what that felt like? I am seventeen, for God's sake.'

'Seventeen's not so young. A hundred years ago people got married when they were our age.'

'Yeah, that was before electricity and the Internet. A hundred years ago eighteen-year-old guys were out there fighting wars with bayonets and holding a man's life in their hands! They lived a lot of life by the time they were our age. What do kid our age know about love and life?' I have never heard him talk like this before- like he cares about something. He is still all worked up from his fight with Genevieve.

I wind my hair into a honey bun and secure it with a ponytail holder. 'You know who you sound like? You sound like my grandpa,' I say. 'Also- I think you're stalling because you don't want to answer the question.'

'I answered it; you just didn't like my answer.'

We pulled up in front of my house. Marcel turns off the engine, which is what he does when he wants to talk a little while longer. So, I do not jump out right away, I put my bag in my lap and search for my keys even though the lights are on upstairs.

Gosh... To be sitting in the passenger seat of Marcel -'s black Audi. Isn't that what every girl has ever wanted, in the history of boys and girls? Not Marcel - specifically, or yes, Marcel - specifically.

Marcel leans his head back against the headrest and closes his eyes.

I say, 'Did you know that when people fight with each other, that means they still really care about each other?' When Marcel does not answer, I say, 'Genevieve must have a hold on you.'

I expect him to deny it, but he does not. Instead, he says, 'She does, but I wish she did not. I do not want to be owned by anyone. Or belong to anyone.'

Margot would say she belongs to herself. Kitty would say she belongs to no one.

-And-

I guess I would say I belong to my sisters and my dad, but that will not always be true.

To belong to someone- I did not know it, but now that I think about it, it seems like that is all- I have ever wanted. To be somebody is, and to have them be mine.

'So that's why you're doing this,' I tell him- I am partly asking but I am mostly telling.

'To prove you do not belong to her. Or with her.' I stop. 'Do you think there is a difference?

Between belonging with and belonging to, I mean?'

'Sure. One implies choice; the other does not.'

'You must love her to go to all this trouble.'

Marcel makes a dismissive sound. 'You're too dreamy-eyed.'

'Thank you,' I say, even though I know he does not mean it as a compliment.

I say it just to bug him.

I know I have succeeded when he says, his face sour, 'What would you know about love,

Lara Jean? You have never even had a boyfriend before.'

I am tempted to make up with someone, a boy from camp, from another town, from anywhere. His name is Clint, and he is on the tip of my tongue. But it would be too humiliating because he would know I was lying; I already told him I never dated anybody before.

-And-

Even if I had not, it is far more pathetic to make up a boyfriend than to just admit the truth. 'No, I have never had a boyfriend. But plenty of people I know have had boyfriends, but they have never once been in love. I have been in love.' That is why I am doing this.

Marcel snorts. 'With whom? Josh Sanderson? That tool?'

'He's not a tool,' I say, frowning at him. 'You don't even know him to say that.'

‘Anybody with one eye and half a brain could tell what a tool that guy is.’

‘Are you saying my sister’s blind and brainless?’ I demand. If he says one bad word about my sister, that is it. This whole thing is off. I do not need him that badly.

Marcel laughs. ‘No. I’m saying you are!'

‘You know what? I changed my mind. You have never loved anyone but yourself.’ I try to jerk the passenger door open, but it is locked.

‘Lara Jean, I was just kidding. Come on.’

‘See you on Monday.’

‘Wait, wait. First, tell me something.’ Marcel leans back in his seat. ‘How come you never dated anybody?’

I shrug. ‘I don’t know - because nobody ever asked?’

‘Bullshit. I know that Martinez asked you to come home and you said no.’

I am surprised he knows about that. ‘What is it with you guys all calling each other by your last name?’ I asked him. ‘It is so- I struggle to find the right word.

‘Affected?’

Affected?’

‘Don’t change the subject.’

‘I said no because I was scared.’ I stared out the window and ran my finger along with the glass, making an M for Martinez.

‘Of Tommy?’

‘No! I like Tommy. It is not that. It is scary when it is real. When it is not just thinking about a person, but, like, having a real live person in front of you, with, like, expectations. And wants.’ I finally look at Marcel, and I am surprised by how hard he is paying attention; his eyes are intent and focused on me like he is interested in what I am saying. ‘Even when I liked a boy so much, loved him even, I- would always rather be with my sisters, because that’s where I belong.’

‘Wait. What about right now?’

‘Right now? Well, I do not like you that way so -’

‘Good,’ Marcel says. ‘Do not go falling for me again, okay? I cannot have any more girls in love with me. It is exhausting.’

I laugh aloud. ‘You’re so full of yourself.’

‘I’m kidding,’ he protests, but he is not. ‘What did you ever see in me anyway?’ He grins at me then, overconfident again and so sure of his charm.

‘Honestly? I really could not tell you.’

The grin falters and then rights itself, but now it is not so certain. ‘You said it was because I make people feel special. You - you said it was because I was a good dancer, and I was science partners with Jeffrey Suttleman!’

‘Wow, you memorized every single word of that letter, huh?’ I tease.

It gives- me a small, mean surge of satisfaction to see Marcel’s grin fade completely.

That surge is immediately followed by remorse because now I have hurt his feelings for no good reason.

What is it in me that wants to hurt Marcel’s feelings? To make it better, I quickly add, ‘No, it’s true- you did have something about you then.’

I guess- I made it worse because he flinches.

I did not know what else to say, so I opened the car door and climbed out. ‘Thanks for the ride, Marcel.’

When I get inside the house, I go look in the kitchen first to check on the cupcakes.

They are packed away in Tupperware and my cupcake carrier. The frosting’s a little messy and the sprinkles are haphazard, but overall, they look surprisingly good. That is a relief. Kitty will not be ashamed of the PTA bake sale on my account, at least!

From: Margot Covey mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk

To: Lara Jean Covey larajeansong@gmail.com

How's school going so far? Have you joined any new clubs? I think you should consider Lit Mag or Model UN. Also, do not forget it is Korean Thanksgiving this week and you must call Grandma, or she will be mad! Miss, you, guys.

PS, please send Oreos! I miss our dunk contests.

Love, M

From: Lara Jean Covey larajeansong@gmail.com

To: Margot Covey mcovey@st-andrews.ac.uk

The school is good. No new clubs yet, but we will see. I already have it down in my planner to call Grandma. Do not worry about a thing, I have everything under control here!

Marcel's MOM OWNS AN ANTIQUE store called Linden & White in the cobblestone part of downtown. She sells furniture mostly, but she has jewelry cases too, arranged by decades. My favorite decade is the aughts, which means the 1900's. There is this one gold heart locket with a tiny diamond chip in the center; it looks like a starburst.

It cost four hundred dollars. The store is right next to McCall's bookstore, so I go in sometimes and visit it. I always expect it to be gone, but then it never is.

We once bought our mom a gold clover pin from the 1940s for Mother's Day. Margot and I ran a lemonade stand every Saturday for a month, and we were able to- chip in sixteen dollars for it. I remember how proud we were when we presented Daddy with the- money, we had it nice and neat in a Ziplock bag. At the time I thought we were paying- the lion's share and my dad was only helping a little. I realize now that the pin cost a lot more than sixteen dollars. I should ask Daddy how much it cost.

But then- I do not want to know. It is nicer not knowing. We buried her with it because it was her favorite.

I am standing over the case, touching my finger to the glass, when Marcel comes out from around back. 'Hey,' he says, surprised.

'Hey,' I say. 'What are you doing here?'

Marcel gives me a look like I am a dummy. 'My mom owns the place, remember?'

‘Well, duh. I have just never seen you here before,’ I say. ‘Do you work here?’

‘Nah, I had to drop something off for my mom. Now she is saying I must go pick up a set of chairs in Huntsburgh tomorrow,’ Marcel says in a grumbly voice. ‘It is two hours there and back. Annoying.’

I nod companionably and lean away from the case. I pretend to look at a pink-and-black globe. Margot would like this. It could be a nice Christmas present for her.

I give it a little spin. ‘How much is this globe?’

‘Whatever it says on the sticker.’ Marcel rests his elbows on the case and leans forward. ‘You should come.’

I look up at him. ‘Come where?’

‘To pick up the chairs with me.’

‘You just complained about how annoying it’s going to be.’

‘Yeah, alone. If you go, it might be slightly less annoying.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’

I roll my eyes. Marcel says ‘you’re welcome’ to everything! It is like, no, Marcel, that was not a genuine thank-you, so you do not need to say you’re welcome.

‘So, are you coming or what?’

‘Or what.’

‘Come on! I am picking the chairs up from an estate sale. The owner was a shut-in. Stuff has just been sitting there for like fifty years. I bet there will be stuff you can look at. You like old stuff, right?’

‘Yes,’ I say, surprised that he knows this about me. ‘, I’ve kind of always wanted to go to an estate sale. How did the owner die? Like, how long was it before someone found him?’

‘God, you’re morbid.’ He shudders. ‘Didn’t know you had that side to you.’

‘I have lots of sides to me,’ I tell him. I lean forward. ‘So? How did he die?’

‘He is not dead, you weirdo. He is just old. His family’s sending him to a nursing home.’

Marcel raises an eyebrow at me. ‘So, I’ll pick you up tomorrow at seven.’

‘Seven? You never said anything about leaving at seven in the morning on a Saturday!’

‘Sorry,’ he says contritely. ‘We have to go early before all the good stuff gets snatched up.’

That night I packed lunches for Marcel and me. I make roast beef sandwiches with cheese and tomato, mayonnaise for me, mustard for Marcel. Marcel does not like mayonnaise. It is funny the things you pick up in a fake relationship.

Kitty zooms into the kitchen and tries to grab a sandwich half. I smacked her hand away.

‘That’s not for you.’

‘Then who’s it for?’

‘It is for my lunch tomorrow. Mine and Marcel’s.’

She climbs onto a stool and watches me wrap the sandwiches in wax paper.

Sandwiches look so much prettier wrapped in wax paper than encased in Ziplock. Any chance I get, I use wax paper. ‘I like Marcel,’ Kitty says. ‘He’s a lot different than Josh, but I like him.’

I look up. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I do not know. He is funny. He jokes around a lot. You must be in love if you are making sandwiches for him. When Margot and Josh first became a couple, she made three-cheese macaroni and cheese all the time because that is his favorite.’

Continued: 1

What’s Marcel’s favorite?’

‘I- I do not know. I mean, he likes everything.’

Kitty gives me the side-eye. ‘If you’re his girlfriend, you should know what his favorite food is.’

‘I know he doesn’t like mayonnaise,’ I offer.

‘That is because mayonnaise is gross. Josh hates mayonnaise too.’

I feel a pang. Josh does hate mayonnaise. ‘Kitty, do you miss Josh?’

She nods. ‘I wish he still came over.’ A wistful look crosses her face, and I am about to give her a hug when she puts her hands on her hips. ‘Just don’t use all the roast beef because I need it for my lunch next week.’

‘If we run out, I will make tuna salad. Sheesh.’ ‘See that you do,’ Kitty says and zooms off again.

‘See that you do?’ Where does she get this stuff?

At seven-thirty I am sitting by the window, waiting for Marcel to pull up. I have a brown paper bag with our sandwiches and my camera, in case there is anything spooky or cool I can take a picture of. I am picturing a crumbling, gray old mansion as you see in horror movies, with a gate and a murky pond or a maze in the backyard.

Marcel’s mom’s minivan pulls up at seven forty-five, which is annoying. I could have slept a whole hour longer. I run out to the car and hop inside, and before I can say a word, he says, ‘I am sorry, I am sorry. But look what I brought you.’ He passes me a donut in a napkin, still warm. ‘I stopped and got it special, right when they opened at seven-thirty. It is mocha sugar.’

I break off a piece and pop it into my mouth. ‘Yum!’

He gives me a sidelong glance as he pulls out of my driveway. ‘So- I did the right thing being late, right?’

I nod, taking a big bite. ‘You did the exact right thing,’ I say, my mouth full.

‘Hey, do you have any water?’

Marcel hands me a half-full water bottle and I gulp it down. ‘This is the best donut I ever had,’ I tell him.

‘Good,’ he says. Then he takes one look at me and laughs. ‘You have sugar all over your face.’

I wipe my mouth off with the other side of the napkin.

‘Cheeks, too,’ he says.

‘All right, all right.’ Then it is quiet, which makes me nervous. ‘Can I put some music on?’ I started pulling out my phone.

‘, do you mind if we just drive in quiet for a while? I cannot have music blaring in my face before my caffeine kicks in.’

‘Oh - sure.’ I am not sure if that means he wants me to be quiet too. I would not have agreed to come on this little outing if I had known I would have to be silent.

Marcel has a serene look on his face like he is a fishing-boat captain, and we are floating placidly along in the middle of the sea. Except he is not driving slowly; he is driving fast.

I stay quiet for all ten seconds and then say, ‘Wait, where are you wanting me to be quiet too?’

‘No, I just did not want music. You can talk as much as you want.’

‘Okay.’ And then I am quiet because it is awkward when someone tells you-you- can talk as much as you want. ‘Hey, so what’s your favorite food?’

‘I like everything.’

‘But what is your favorite? Like, you are favorite- favorite. Is it macaroni and cheese, or um, fried chicken, or steak, or pizza?’

‘I like all that stuff. Equally.’

I let out an aggrieved sigh. Why does Marcel not get the concept of picking a favorite thing?

Marcel's mimics my sigh and laughs. ‘Fine. I like cinnamon toast. That is my favorite thing.’

‘Cinnamon toast?’ I repeat. ‘You like cinnamon toast better than crab legs? Better than a cheeseburger?’

‘Yes.’

‘Better than barbecue?’

Marcel hesitates. Then he says, ‘Yes! Now I quit picking my choice apart. I stand by my choice.’

I shrug. ‘Okay.’ I waited give him a chance to ask me what my favorite food was, but he did not. So- I say, ‘My favorite food is cake.’

‘What kind of cake?’

‘It does not matter. All cake.’

‘You just gave me so much shit for not picking,’ he begins.

‘But it’s so hard to pick one kind!’ I burst out. ‘I mean, there’s coconut cake, the kind with white frosting that looks like a snowball- I like that a lot. But then I also like cheesecake, lemon cake, and carrot cake. Also- red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting, and chocolate cake with chocolate ganache frosting.’ I pause.

‘Have you ever had an olive-oil cake?’

‘No. That sounds weird.’

‘It is good. Moist and delicious. I will make it for you.’

Marcel groans. ‘You are making me hungry. I should have gotten a whole bag of those donuts.’

I open my brown paper bag and pull out his sandwich. I wrote a P on his in Sharpie so- I would know whose was. ‘Do you want a sandwich?’

‘You made that for me?’

‘I mean, I was making one for myself, too. It would have been rude to just bring one sandwich and eat it in front of you.’

Marcel accepts the sandwich and eats it with the bottom half still wrapped.

‘This is good,’ he says, nodding. ‘What kind of mustard is this?’

Please, I say, ‘It is beer mustard. My dad orders it from some fancy food catalog. My dad’s really into cooking.’ ‘Aren’t you going to eat yours, too?’

‘I’m saving it for later,’ I say.

Halfway into the ride, Marcel starts weaving in and out of traffic, and he keeps looking at the clock on the dashboard.

‘Why are we in such a hurry?’ I asked him.

‘The Epsteins,’ he says, rapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

‘Who are the Epsteins?’

‘They are an old married couple with an antique store in Charlottesville.

Last time, Phil got there five minutes before me and cleared the whole place out. That is not going to happen today.’

Impressed, I say, ‘Wow, I had no idea this business was so cutthroat.’

Like a know-it-all, Marcel smirks and goes, ‘Isn’t all business?’

I roll my eyes at the window. Marcel’s so Marcel.

We are at a stoplight when Marcel suddenly sits up straight and says, ‘Oh, shit! The Epsteins!’

I was half asleep. My eyes fly open, and I yell, ‘Where? Where?’

‘Red SUV! Two cars ahead on the right.’ I crane my neck to look. They are a gray-haired couple, in their sixties or seventies. It is hard to tell from this far away.

As soon as the light turns green, Marcel guns it and drives up on the shoulder. I scream out, ‘Go go go!’ and then we are flying past the Epsteins. My heart is racing out of control,

I cannot help but lean my head out the window and scream because it is such a thrill. My hair whips in the wind and I know it is going to be a tangled mess, but I could not care less.

‘Yahhh!’ I scream.

‘You’re crazy,’ Marcel says, pulling me back in by the hem of my shirt.

He is looking at me like he did that day I kissed him in the hallway. Like I am different than he thought.

We pulled up to the house and there were already a few cars parked in front. I am craning my head trying to get a good look. I was expecting a mansion with a wrought iron gate and a gargoyle or two, but this just looks like a normal

house. I must look disappointed, because as he puts the car in park, Marcel says to me, 'Do not judge an estate sale by the house. I have seen all kinds of treasures in regular houses and junk at fancy houses.'

I hop out and bend down to tie my shoelace. 'Hurry, Lara Jean! The Epsteins will be here any second!' Marcel grabs my hand and we run up the driveway; I am breathing hard trying to keep up with him. His legs are so much longer than mine.

As soon as we are inside, Marcel goes right up to a man in a suit, and I bend over and try to catch my breath. A few people are milling around looking at the furniture. There is a long dining room table in the center of the room with China and milk glass and porcelain knickknacks. I go up to it and take a closer look. I like a little white creamer with pink rosebuds, but I am not sure if I am allowed to touch it and see how much it costs. It could be expensive.

There is a big basket with olden-day Christmas memorabilia in it, plastic Santas and Rudolphs and glass ornaments. I am sifting through it when Marcel comes up to me, a huge grin on his face. 'Mission accomplished,' he says. He nods at an older couple who are looking at a wooden sideboard. 'The Epsteins,' he whispers to me.

'Did you get the chairs?' Mr. Epstein calls out. He is trying to sound casual and not annoyed, but his hands are on his hips, and he is standing very rigidly.

'You know it,' Marcel calls back. 'Better luck next time.' To me he says, 'Do you see anything cool?'

'Lots of stuff.' I hold up a hot pink reindeer. It is glass, with an electric blue nose. 'This would look great on my vanity. Will you ask the man how much it costs?'

'No, but you can. It will be good for you to learn how to negotiate.' Marcel grabs my hand and leads me over to the man in the suit. He is filling out some paperwork on a clipboard.

He looks terribly busy and important. I am not even sure if I am supposed to be here. I am thinking I do not need this reindeer.

But Marcel's looking at me expectantly, so I clear my throat and say, 'Excuse me, sir, but how much is this reindeer?'

‘Oh, that’s part of a lot,’ he says.

‘Oh. Um, I am sorry but what is a lot?’

‘It means it’s part of a set,’ he explains. ‘You must buy the complete set of ornaments.

Seventy-five dollars. They are vintage, you see.’

I started to back away. ‘Thank you anyway,’ I say.

Marcel pulls me back and gives him a winning smile and says, ‘Can’t you just throw it in with the chairs? A gift with purchase?’

The man sighs. ‘I don’t want to separate them.’ He turns away to flip through his clipboard.

Marcel throws me a look like You are the one who wants the reindeer; you should step up. I give him back a look that says I do not want it that bad, and Marcel shakes his head firmly and pushes me toward the man. I say, ‘Please, sir? I will give you ten dollars for it.

No one will know they are missing a reindeer. And look, his paw is a little chipped on the bottom, see?’ I hold it up.

‘All right, all right. Just take it,’ the man says begrudgingly, and I beam at him and start to pull my wallet out of my purse, but he waves me off.

‘Thank you! Thank you so much.’ I clutch the reindeer to my chest. Maybe haggling is not as hard as I thought.

Marcel winks at me, and then he says to the man, ‘I’ll bring my van closer so, we can load up the chairs.’

They go out the back, and I hang around, looking at the framed pictures on the wall. I wonder if they are on sale too. Some of them look old: black-and-white pictures of men in suits and hats. There is one picture of a girl in a confirmation dress, it is white and lacy like a wedding gown. The girl is not smiling, but she has a mischievous glint in her eye that reminds me of Kitty.

‘That’s my daughter, Patricia.’

I turn around. It is an old man in a navy-blue sweater and stiff jeans. He is leaning against the staircase watching me. He looks very frail; his skin is paper white and thin.

‘She lives in Ohio. She is an accountant.’ He is still gazing at me as I remind him of someone.

‘Your house is lovely,’ I say, even though it is not. It is old; it could use good cleaning.

But the things inside it are lovely.

‘It is empty now. All my things sold up. Cannot take it with you, you know.’

‘You mean when you die?’ I whisper.

He glares at me. ‘No. I mean to the nursing home.’

Whoops. ‘Right,’ I say, and I giggle the way I do when I feel awkward.

‘What do you have there in your hand?’

I lift it. ‘This. He- the man in the suit gave it to me. Do you want it back? I did not pay for it. It is part of a lot.’

He smiles, and the wrinkles in his paper skin deepen. ‘That was Patty’s favorite.’

I held it out to him. ‘Maybe she’d like to keep it?’

‘No, you have it. It is yours. She could not even be bothered to help me move, so.’ He gives a spiteful nod. ‘Is there anything else you want to take? I have a trunk full of her old clothes.’

Yikes. Family drama. Best not to get involved in that. But vintage clothes!

That is tempting.

When Marcel finds me, I am sitting cross-legged on the floor in the music room, looking through an old trunk. Mr. Clarke is snoozing on the couch next to me. I found a mod minidress the color of cotton candy pink that I am crazy about, and a sleeveless button-down with little daisies on it that I can tie at the waist. ‘Look, Marcel!’ I lift the dress.

‘Mr. Clarke said I could have it.’

‘Who’s Mr. Clarke?’ Marcel asks, and his voice fills the room.

I pointed at him and put my finger to my lips.

‘Well, we’d better get out of here fast before the guy in charge of the sale sees him giving stuff away for free.’

I got up in a hurry. ‘Bye, Mr. Clarke,’ I say, not too loud. Better to let him sleep. He was very down earlier when he was telling me about his divorce.

Mr. Clarke’s eyes flutter open. ‘Is this your feller?’

‘No, not really,’ I say, and Marcel throws his arm around my shoulder and says, ‘Yes, sir. I am her feller.’

I do not like the way he says it like he is making fun. Of both me and Mr.

Clarke. ‘Thank you for the clothes, Mr. Clarke,’ I say, and he sits up straight and reaches for my hand. I give it to him, and he kisses it, and his lips feel like dry moth’s wings.

‘You’re welcome, Patty.’

I give him a goodbye wave and grab my new things. As we walk out the front door, Marcel says, ‘Who’s Patty?’ and I pretend I do not hear.

I must fall asleep in about two seconds from the excitement of the day, because the next thing I know, we are parked in my driveway, and Marcel’s shaking my shoulder, saying, ‘We’re here, Lara Jean.’

I open my eyes. I am clutching my dress and shirt to my chest like a security blanket, and my reindeer is on my lap. My new treasures. I feel like I just robbed a bank and got away with it. ‘Thanks for today, Marcel.’

‘Thanks for coming with me.’ Then, abruptly, he says, ‘Oh yes. I forgot to ask you something. My mom wants you to come over to dinner tomorrow night.’

My mouth drops. ‘You told your mom about us?’

Marcel gives me a dirty look. ‘Kitty knows about us! Besides, my mom and I are close.

It is just her and me and my brother, Owen. If you do not want to come, then do not come.

But just know that my mom will think you are rude if you do not.’

‘I am just saying - the more people that know, the harder it is to manage.

You must keep lies restricted to as few people as possible.'

'How do you know so much about lying?'

'Oh, I used to lie all the time as a kid.' I did not think of it as lying, though. I thought of it as playing make-believe. I told Kitty she was adopted, and her real family was in a traveling circus. It is why she took up gymnastics.

IM NOT SURE HOW DRESSED up I should get for dinner at Marcel's house. At the store, his mom seems so fancy. I just do not want to meet her and have her be thinking of all the ways that I am lacking compared to Genevieve. I do not see why I must meet her at all.

But I do want her to like me.

I go through my closet, and then Margot's closet. I finally picked a cream-colored sweater and a blouse with a Marcel Pan collar, with a corduroy mustard circle skirt.

Plus, tights and flats. Then I put on some makeup, which I hardly ever wear. I put on peach blush, and I try to do some eye makeup, but I end up washing everything off and starting over again, this time with just mascara and lip gloss. I go show Kitty and she says, 'Looks like a uniform.'

'Like in an effective way?'

Kitty nods. 'Like you work at a nice store.'

Before Marcel arrives at my house, I go on the computer and look up what fork to use with what, just in case.

It is strange... Sitting at Marcel's kitchen table, I feel like I am living someone else's life. It turns out Marcel's mom made pizzas, so I did not even need to worry about forks. And their house is not fancy on the inside; it is only normal and nice. There is a real butter churner on display in the kitchen, pictures of Marcel and his brother hanging on the walls of wooden frames, and red-and-white gingham, everything.

There are a bunch of pizza toppings on the breakfast bar- not just pepperoni, sausage, mushroom, and pepper, but also artichoke hearts and greasy kalamata olives and fresh mozzarella and whole cloves of garlic.

Marcel's mom is nice. She keeps putting more salad on my plate throughout dinner, and I keep eating it even though I am full. Once, I caught her

looking at me, and she had a soft smile on her face. When she smiles, she looks like Marcel.

Marcel's younger brother is named Owen. He is twelve. He is like a miniature Marcel, but he does not talk as much. He does not have Marcel's effortless way. Owen grabs a slice of pizza and shoves it into his mouth even though it is too hot. He puffs out stifling air and he almost spits a piece back out into his napkin, and their mom says, 'Do not you dare, Owen. We have company.'

'Leave me alone,' Owen mumbles.

'Marcel says you have two sisters,' Mrs. - says with a bright smile.

She cuts a piece of lettuce into bite-sized bits. 'Your mother must love having three girls.'

I open my mouth to answer her, but before I can, Marcel does. He says, 'Lara Jean's mom passed away when she was little.' He says it as she should already know, and embarrassment crosses her face.

'I am so sorry. I remember that now.'

Quickly I say, 'She did love having three girls. They thought for sure my little sister Kitty was going to be a boy, and my mom said she was so used to girls she was nervous about what she was going to do with a boy. So, she was relieved when Kitty turned out to be a girl. My sister Margot and I were too; we would pray every night we would get a sister and not a brother.'

'Hey, what's wrong with boys?' Marcel objects.

Mrs. -'s smiling now. She puts another piece of pizza on Owen's plate and says,

'You are heathens. Wild animals. I bet Lara Jean and her sisters are angels.' Marcel snorts.

'Well - Kitty might be part heathen,' I admit. 'But my older sister Margot and I are fairly good.'

Mrs. - takes her napkin and tries to wipe tomato sauce off Owen's face, and he swats her hand away. 'Mom!'

When she gets up to take another pizza out of the oven, Marcel says to me, 'See how my mom babies him?'

‘She babies you way more,’ Owen counters. To me, he mumbles, ‘Marcel doesn’t even know how to cook ramen.’

I laugh. ‘Can you?’

‘Hell yes, I’ve been cooking for myself for years,’ he says.

‘I like to cook too,’ I say, taking a sip of iced tea. ‘We should give Marcel a cooking lesson.’

He eyes me and then says, ‘You wear more makeup than Genevieve did.’

I shrink back as he slapped me. All I am wearing is mascara! And a little lip gloss! I know that Genevieve wears bronzer, eyeshadow, and concealer every day.

Plus, mascara, eyeliner, and lipstick! Swiftly Marcel says, ‘Shut up, Owen.’

Owen’s snickering. I narrow my eyes. This kid is only a few years older than Kitty!

I lean forward and wave my hand in front of my face. ‘This is all-natural. But thank you for the compliment, Owen.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he says, just like his big brother.

On the drive home, I say, ‘Hey, Marcel?’

‘What?’

‘Never mind.’

‘What? Just ask.’

‘Well - your parents are divorced, right?’

‘Yup.’

‘So how often do you see your dad?’

‘Not often.’

‘Oh, okay. I was just wondering.’ Marcel looks over at me with expectant eyes.

‘What?’ I speak.

‘I am just waiting for the next question. You never just have one question.’

‘Well, do you miss him?’

‘Who?’

‘Your dad!’

‘Oh. I do not know. It is more than I miss how it used to be with us.

He and my mom and me and Owen. We were like a team. He used to come to every lacrosse game.’

Marcel gets quiet. ‘He just - took care of things.’

‘I guess that’s what dads do.’

‘That’s what he’s doing for his new family.’ Marcel says it matter-of-factly, without bitterness. ‘What about you? You miss your mom?’

‘Sometimes, when I think about it.’ Suddenly I say, ‘You know what I miss? I miss bath time. I miss when she would wash my hair. Don’t you think getting your hair washed is just the best feeling? Like, warm water and bubbles and fingers in your hair. It is so nice.’

‘Yeah, it is.’

‘Sometimes I do not think about her at all, and then - and then sometimes I will have a thought like, I wonder what she would think of me now? She only knew me as a little girl, and now I am a teenager, and I wonder, if she saw me on the street, would she recognize me?’

‘Of course, she would. She is your mom.’

‘I know, but I’ve changed a lot.’ An uncomfortable look has crossed his face, and I can tell he is regretting complaining about his dad because at least his dad is still alive.

-And-

Then, because Marcel’s looking at me like he feels sorry for me, I straighten up and say in a haughty voice, ‘I’m very mature, you know.’

He is grinning now. ‘Oh, yes?’

‘Oh, yes, I’m very refined, Marcel.’

When Marcel drops me off, right before I get out of the car, he says, 'I can tell my mom liked you.' This makes me feel good inside. It has always been important to me that other people's moms like me.

It was my favorite part of going over to Genevieve's house- hanging out with her mom. Wendy was so stylish. She used to wear a silky blouse and nice pants and a statement necklace, just for sitting around the house. Perfect hair, always smooth and flat. Genevieve has that same good hair, but she does not have her mom's perfectly straight nose. Hers has a little bump on the bridge that I think only adds to her appeal.

'You do not wear more makeup than Gen. She was always getting bronzer on my white shirts.'

For someone who is over Genevieve, he sure does talk about her a lot.

Though it is not just him. I was thinking about her too. Even when she is not here, she is here. That girl has reach.

Continued: 2

DURING CHEMISTRY, Marcel WRITES ME a note that says, Can I come over tonight to study for the test?

I write back, I do not remember study sessions being in the contract. After he reads it, he turns around and gives me a wounded look. I mouth, I am kidding!

At dinner, I announce that Marcel's coming over to study and we are going to need the kitchen, and my dad raises his eyebrows. 'Leave the door open,' he jokes.

We do not even have a door to the kitchen.

'Daddy,' I groan, and Kitty groans with me. Casually he asks, 'Is Marcel your boyfriend?'

'Um - something like that,' I say.

After we eat and Kitty and I do the dishes, I set up the kitchen like a study room. My textbook and notes are stacked up in the center of the table, with a row of highlighters in blue, yellow, and pink, a bowl of microwave kettle corn, and a plate of peanut-butter brownies I baked this afternoon. I let Kitty have two but that is it.

He said he would be over around eight. At first, he is just late as usual, but the minutes tick by and I realize he is not coming. I texted him once, but he did not text back.

Kitty comes down between commercial breaks, sniffing around for another brownie, which I give her. 'Is Marcel not coming?' she asks. I pretend I am so absorbed in my studying I do not hear.

Um around ten he sends a text that says, Sorry, something came up. I cannot come over tonight.

He does not say where he is or what he is doing, but I already know. He is with Genevieve.

At lunch he was distracted; he kept texting on his phone. And then, later in the day, I saw them outside the girls' locker room. They did not see me, but I saw them.

They were just- talking, but with Genevieve, it is never just anything. She put her hand on his arm; he brushed her hair out of her eyes. I may only be a fake girlfriend, but that is not anything.

I keep studying, but it is hard to concentrate when your feelings are hurt. I tell myself it is just because I went to the trouble of baking brownies and cleaning up the downstairs.

I mean, it is rude to just not show up somewhere. Does he not have manners?

How would- he like it if I did that? And really, what is the whole point of this charade if he is just going- to keep going back to her anyway? What is even in it for me anymore?

Things are better with Josh and me, normal. If I wanted to, I could just call the whole thing off.

The next morning, I wake up still mad. I called Josh to ask him for a ride to school. For a- second, I worry he might not pick up; it has been so long since we spent time together.

But he does, and he says no problem.

Let us see how Marcel likes it when he comes to my house to pick me up and I am not there.

Halfway to school, I start to feel uneasy. Marcel had a legitimate reason for not- coming over. He was not with Genevieve and now I have just done a very petty thing out of spite.

Josh is looking at me with suspicious eyes. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

He does not believe me, I can tell. 'Did you and - have a fight?'

'No.'

Josh sighs and says, 'Just be careful.' He says it in a patronizing older brother kind of way that makes me want to scream. 'I don't want to see you hurt by that guy.'

'Josh! He will not hurt me. Geez.'

'He is a douche. I am sorry, but he is. All the guys on the lacrosse team are.'

Guys like-, they only care about one thing. As soon as they get what they want, they are bored.'

'Not Marcel. He dated Genevieve for almost four years!'

'Just trust me. You have not had much experience with guys, Lara Jean.'

Quietly I ask, 'How would you know?'

Josh gives me an Oh, come on the look. 'Because I know you.'

'Not as well as you think.'

We are quiet the rest of the way.

It will not be that big of a deal. Marcel will stop by my house, see that I am not there, and- then he will leave. Big deal, so he had to go five minutes out of his way. I waited for him last night for two friggin' hours.

When we get to school, Josh heads for the senior hall and I go straight to the junior hall. I keep sneaking peeks down the hallway at Marcel's locker, but he does not arrive. I waited at my locker until the bell rang, and he still had not come. I run off to the first period, my backpack banging against my back as I go.

Mr. Schuller is taking attendance when I look up and see Marcel standing in the doorway glaring at me.

He gestures at me to come out. I gulped and quickly looked down at- my notebook and pretended like I did not see him. But then he hisses my name, and I know I must talk to him.

Shakily I raise my hand. ‘Mr. Schuller, can I go to the bathroom?’ ‘You should have gone before class,’ he grumbles, but he waves me on.

I hurry out to the hallway and pull Marcel away from the door so Mr. Schuller cannot see.

‘Where were you this morning?’ Marcel demands.

I cross my arms and try to stand tall. It is hard because I am so short, and he Were is- tall.

‘You’re one to talk.’

Marcel huffs, ‘At least I texted you! I have called you like seventeen times.

Why is your phone off?’

‘You know we’re not allowed to have our phones on at school!’

He huffs, ‘Lara Jean, I waited in front of your house for twenty minutes.’

Yikes. ‘Well, I’m sorry.’

‘How would you get to school? Sanderson?’

‘Yes.’

Marcel exhales. ‘Listen, if you were pissed, I couldn’t come over last night, you should’ve just called and said so instead of the shit you pulled this morning.’

In a small voice, I say, ‘Well, what about that shit you pulled last night?’

A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. ‘Did you just say ‘shit’? It sounds funny coming out of your mouth.’

I ignore that. ‘So - were you? Were you with Genevieve?’ I do not ask what I want to know, which is, did you guys get back together?

He hesitates and then he says, 'She needed me.'

I cannot even look at him. Why is he such a dummy? Why does she have such a hold on him?

Is it just the amount of time they have been together? Is it sex? I do not understand. It is disappointing how little self-control boys have. 'Marcel, if you're just going to go running every time she beckons, I don't see a point to any of this.'

'Covey, come on! I said I was sorry. Do not be pissed.'

'You never said you were sorry,' I say. 'When did you say you were sorry?'

Chastened, he says, 'Sorry.'

'I do not want you to go to Genevieve's anymore. How do you think that makes me look to her?'

Marcel looks at me steadily. 'I can't be there for Gen, so don't ask me to.'

'But Marcel, what does she even need you for when she has a new boyfriend?'

He flinches, and right away I am sorry I said it. 'I'm sorry,' I whisper.

'It is fine. I do not expect you to understand it. Gen and I - we just get each other.'

He does not know it, but when Marcel talks about Genevieve, he gets a certain softness- in his face.

Its tenderness mixed with impatience. And something else.

Love. Marcel can protest all he wants, but I know he still loves her.

Sighing, I ask, 'Did you at least study for the test?'

Marcel shakes his head, and I sigh again.

'You can look at my notes during lunch,' I say, and I head back to my class.

It is starting to make sense to me. Why he would go along with a scheme like this, why he would spend his time with someone like me. It is not so he can move on from Gen.

It is so he- cannot. I am just his excuse. I am holding Genevieve's place for her. When that piece makes sense, everything else starts too.

JOSH'S PARENTS FIGHT A LOT- I do not know if it is a normal amount of fighting because I- only have one parent, but I do not remember my parents fighting that much when I had two. Our houses are close enough that I can hear them sometimes if my window is open.

The fights usually start with something small, like Mrs. Sanderson accidentally leaving the car door open and the battery going dead, and end with something big, like how Mr. Sanderson works too much and is inherently selfish and not cut out for a family.

When they fight badly, Josh comes over. When we were younger, he would sneak out sometimes in his pajamas with his pillow, and he would stay until his mom came looking for him. It is not something we talk about. He and Margot, but not me and him. The most he ever said about it was that sometimes he wished they would just get divorced- so it could finally be over. They never did, though.

I can hear them tonight. I have heard those other nights since Margot left, but tonight sounds particularly bad. So, badly I closed my window. I gather up my- homework and go- downstairs and turn on the living room light so Josh knows he can come over if he wants.

Half an hour later there is a knock at the door. I wrap myself in my pale blue baby blanket and open it.

It is Josh. He smiles at me sheepishly. 'Hey. Can I spend time together here for a bit?'

'Course you can.' I leave the door open and trudge back to the living room. I call back, 'Lock it behind you.'

Josh watches TV and I do my homework. I am highlighting my way through US history when Josh asks me, 'Are you going to try out for Arcadia?' That is the spring play. They just announced it yesterday.

'No,' I say, switching highlighter colors. 'Why would I?' I hate public speaking and getting up in front of people, and Josh knows it.

‘Duh, because it’s your favorite play.’ Josh changes the channel. ‘I think you’d be a really good Thomasina.’

I smile. ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’

‘Why not? It could be something good to put on your college apps.’

‘It’s not like I’m going to be a theater major or anything.’

‘It wouldn’t kill you to get out of your comfort zone a little bit,’ he says, stretching his arms out behind his head. ‘Take a risk. Look at Margot. She is all the way over in Scotland.’

‘I’m not Margot.’

‘I am not saying you should move to the other side of the world. I know you would never do that. Hey, what about Honor Council? You love judging people!’

I make a face at him.

‘Or Model UN. I bet you would like that. I am just saying - your world could be bigger than just playing checkers with Kitty and riding around in -’s car.’

I stop highlighting midsentence. Is he right? Is my world that small?

It is not like- his world is so big! ‘Josh,’ I begin. Then I pause because I do not know how I am going to finish the sentence. So instead, I threw my highlighter at him.

It ricochets off his forehead. ‘Hey! You could have hit me in the eye!’

‘And you would have deserved it.’

‘Okay, okay. You know I did not mean it like that. I just mean that you should give people a chance to know you.’ Josh points the remote control at me and says, ‘If people knew you, they would love you.’ He sounds so matter of fact.

Josh, you break my heart. And you are a liar. Because you know me, you know me better than anybody, and you do not love me.

After Josh goes back home, I tidy up the living room, lock all the doors, and turn off the lights. Then I pour myself a glass of water and head upstairs.

The light is on in my bedroom, and Chris is asleep in my bed. I roll her to the side- so I can fit in too. Stirring, she mumbles, 'Want to get hot wings?'

'It's too late to eat hot wings,' I say, pulling my quilt up so it covers both of us. 'You just missed Josh.'

Her eyes fly open. 'Joshy was here? Why?'

'No reason.' I will not tell Josh's secrets, not even to Chris.

'Well, don't mention it too -.' 'He wouldn't care,' I say.

Chris shakes her head. 'All boys care.'

'Marcel's not like that. He is confident.'

'They're the ones that care the most,' she says. I am about to ask her what- she means, but before I can, she says, 'Let us do something wild.'

'Like what?' It is a school night; I cannot go anywhere, and she knows it. But I still like to hear her schemes. They are like bedtime stories.

'Like - I do not know. We could sneak into the nursing home and break out that grandma you are always talking about. What is her name again? Thunder?'

I giggle. 'Stormy.'

'Yeah, Stormy.' She yawns. 'She seems like she knows how to have an enjoyable time. I bet she would buy us cocktails.'

'Stormy goes to sleep at nine every night to get her beauty rest. Let us do it tomorrow.'

By tomorrow, Chris will have forgotten all about it, but it is still a nice thought. Her eyes are closed again.

I poked her in the side. 'Chris, wake up. Go brush your teeth.' I keep a toothbrush in my bathroom drawer just for her. I painted a cursive C on it with red nail polish, so it does not get mixed up with anybody else's toothbrush.

'Cannot. I am too tired to move.'

'A second ago you wanted to break Stormy out of Bellevue, and now you're too tired to wash your face and brush your teeth?' Chris smiles but does not open her eyes. I turn off my bedside lamp. 'Night, Chris.'

She wriggles closer to me. 'G'night.'

THERE ARE VERY LIMITED Options for Asian girls on Halloween.

Like one year- I went as Velma from Scooby-Doo, but people just asked me if I was a manga character. I even wore a wig! So now I am committed to dressing up as Asian characters solely.

Margot never goes as a person; she is always an inanimate object or a concept of some kind. Like last year she went as a 'formal apology': she wore a floor-length evening- gown we found at Goodwill for ten dollars, and she had a sign around her neck, written in- calligraphy, which said, I am sorry. It won second prize in the school contest.

The first prize went to a Rastafarian alien.

Kitty's going as a ninja, which I suppose is in line with my whole Asian costume idea.

This year I am going to Cho Chang from Harry Potter. I have my Raven claw scarf and an old black choir robe I found on eBay, plus one of my dad's ties and a wand. I am not going to win any contests, but at least people will know what I am. I wish I never have to answer a What are you? The question ever again.

I am waiting for Marcel to pick me up for school, messing with my knee-highs. They will not stay up.

'Lara Jean!'

Automatically I call back, 'Josh!' It is our version of Marco Polo.

Then I look up. There's Josh, standing in front of his car. In a full-on Harry Potter costume. Black robe, glasses, lightning mark on his forehead, wand.

We both burst out laughing. Of all the random costumes! Ruefully Josh says, 'The guys from the graphic-novel club are going as different fantasy-book characters.

I- was going to- go as Drogo from Game of Thrones because, you know, I have the upper body for it, but-'

I giggle, trying to picture Josh with eyeliner and a long braid and no shirt.

It is a funny picture. I would not exactly call Josh scrawny, but -

‘Hey, quit laughing so hard,’ the objects. ‘It wasn’t that funny.’ He jingles his keys. ‘So- do you need a ride, Cho?’

I look at my phone. Marcel’s five minutes late as usual. Not that I can complain, because it is a free ride to school, and I could be taking the bus. But if I go with Josh, I will not have to rush to class, I can go to my locker, I can go pee, I can get a juice at the vending machine. But he is already here. ‘Thanks, but I’m waiting for Marcel.’

Josh nods. ‘Oh, yes - right.’ He starts to climb into his car.

I shout out, ‘Expelliarmus!’ and Josh spins around and calls back, ‘Finite!’

Then we grin at each other like goofs.

He drives off and I hug my knees to my chest. Josh and I read Harry Potter around the- same time when I was in sixth and he was in seventh. Margot had already read them.

Neither of us can read as fast as she does. It drove her crazy waiting for us to get to the third book- so we could discuss it.

The longer I sit waiting for Marcel, the more- prickly I feel. I took off my robe and put it back on a few times. It is polyester, and polyester does not breathe or feel nice against- your skin.

When he drives up, I run to his car and get in without saying hello. I spread my robe over my lap like a blanket because my kilt is short.

His eyes are big. ‘You look hot,’ he says, sounding surprised. ‘What are you? An anime character...?’

‘No,’ I say, or more like a snap. ‘I’m Cho Chang.’ Marcel still has a blank look on his face, so I add, ‘From Harry Potter.’

‘Oh yes. Cool.’

I look over at him. He is wearing a regular button-down and jeans. ‘Where’s your costume?’

‘My boys and I are going to change right before the assembly. It is a better effect if we unveil at the same time.’

I know he wants me to ask what his costume is, but I do not want to talk to him, so I- sit there, not saying anything and looking out the window. I keep

waiting for him to ask- me what is wrong, but he does not. He is so oblivious; I do not even think he notices I am mad.

Abruptly I say, 'I wish you weren't always late.'

Marcel frowns. 'Geez, sorry. I was trying to get my costume together.'

'Today you were trying to get your costume together. But you are late all the time.'

'I'm not late all the time!'

'You were late today, and yesterday, and last Thursday.' I stare out the window. The autumn leaves are already falling.

'If you're not going to be on time, I don't- want you giving me rides anymore.'

I do not have to look; I can feel him glaring at me. 'Fine. That means I get five extra minutes of sleep, so, works for me.'

'Good.'

During the judging, Chris and I are sitting on the balcony of the theater.

Chris is dressed- up like Courtney Love. She is wearing a layoff notice and holey knee socks and lots of smudgy eye makeup.

'You should go down there too,' I say. 'I bet you'd win something.'

'People at this school wouldn't even know who she is,' Chris sneers. But I can tell she wants to.

The guys in Marcel's group are all superheroes. There's Batman, Superman, Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, all to varying degrees of effort. Marcel went all out. He is, of course, Marcel Parker. Who else would - go as? His Spider-Man costume is super authentic, with yellow Mylar eyes and gloved hands and booted feet. He is a total ham up onstage.

All the guys run around, capes flapping, pretending to fight each other. Marcel tries to climb-

up a column, but Mr. Yelznik stops him before he can get far. I cheer when his group wins for the best group costume.

Genevieve is Catwoman. She is wearing leather leggings and a bustier and black cat- ears. I wonder if she was in on the superhero theme, if Marcel told her, or if she came up- with that on her own. Every guy in the auditorium goes wild when she goes on stage for the best junior costume. ‘What a ho,’ Chris says. She sounds almost wistful.

Genevieve wins, of course. I sneak a look at Marcel, and he is whistling and stomping his feet with all his friends.

After the assembly, I am getting my Chem book out of my locker when Marcel- comes over and leans his back against the locker next to mine. Through his mask, he says, ‘Hey.’

‘Hey,’ I say. And then he does not say anything else; he just stands there. I close my locker door and spin the combination lock. ‘Congratulations on winning the best group costume.’

‘That is, it? That is all you are going to say?’

Huh? ‘What else am I supposed to say?’

Just then Josh walks by with Jersey Mike, who is dressed up as a hobbit, hairy feet, and all. Walking backward, Josh points his wand at me and says, ‘Expelliarmus!’

Automatically I point my wand back at him and say, ‘Avada Kedavra!’

Josh clutches his chest as I have shot him. ‘Harsh!’ he calls out, and he disappears down the hallway.

‘Uh - don’t you think it’s weird for my supposed girlfriend to wear a couple- costume with another guy?’ Marcel asks me.

I roll my eyes. I am still mad at him from this morning. ‘I am sorry, I cannot talk to you when you look like this. How am I supposed to have a conversation with a person in head-to-toe latex?’

Marcel pushes his mask up. ‘I am serious! How do you think it makes me look?’

‘First of all, it was not planned. Second, nobody cares what my costume is! Who would even notice something like that?’

‘People notice,’ Marcel huffs. ‘I noticed.’

‘Well, I am sorry. I am deeply sorry that a coincidence like this would ever occur.’

‘I doubt it was a coincidence,’ Marcel mutters.

‘What do you want me to do? Do you want me to pop over to the Halloween store during lunch and buy a red wig and be Mary Jane?’

Smoothly Marcel says, ‘Could you? That would be great.’

‘No, I could not. You know why? Because I am Asian, and people will just think I am in a manga costume.’ I handed him my wand. ‘Hold this.’ I lean down and lift the hem of my robe- so I can adjust my knee socks.

Frowning, he says, ‘I could have been someone from the book if you’d told me in advance.’

‘Yes, well, today you’d make a great Moaning Myrtle.’

Marcel gives me a blank look, and disbelieving, I say, ‘Wait a minute - have you never read ‘Harry Potter’?’

‘I’ve read the first two.’

‘Then you should know who Moaning Myrtle is!’

‘It was a really long time ago,’ Marcel says. ‘Was she one of those people in the paintings?’

‘No! And how could you stop after Chamber of Secrets? The third one is the best out of the whole series.

I mean, that is crazy to me.’ I peered at his face. ‘Do you do not have a soul?’

‘Sorry if I have not read every single Harry Potter book! Sorry, I have a life and I am not in the Final Fantasy club or whatever that geek club is called-’

I snatch my wand back from him and wave it in his face. ‘Silencio!’

Marcel crosses his arms. Smirking, he says, ‘Whatever spell you just tried to cast on me, it didn’t work, so you need to go back to Hogwarts.’ He is so proud of himself for the Hogwarts reference, it is endearing.

Quick like a cat, I pulled down his mask, and then I put one hand over his mouth. With my- another hand I wave my wand again. ‘Silencio!’ Marcel

tries to say something, but I press my hand harder. 'What? What was that? I cannot hear you, Marcel Parker.'

Marcel reaches out and tickles me, and I laugh so hard I almost drop my wand. I dart away from him, but he pounces after me, pretends shooting webs at my feet.

Giggling, I- run away from him, further down the hall, dodging groups of people. He gives chase all- the way to chem class. A teacher screams at us to slow down, and we do, but as soon as we are around the corner, I am running again and so is he.

I am breathless by the time I am in my seat. He turns around and shoots a web in my direction, and I explode into giggles again and Mr. Meyers glares at me.

'Settle down,' he says, and I nod obediently. As soon as his back is turned, I giggle into my robe.

I want to still be mad at Marcel, but it is just no use.

Halfway through class, he sends me a note. He has spiderwebs drawn around the edges.

It says I will be on time tomorrow. I smile as I read it. Then I put it in my backpack, in my French textbook so the page will not crease or crumble. I want to keep it so when this is over, I can have something to look at and remember what it was like to be Marcel's girlfriend. Even if it was all just pretend.

WHEN WE PULL UP IN my driveway, Kitty runs out of the house and over to the car.

'Spider-Man!' she shrieks. She is still in her ninja costume, though she has taken the mask off. 'Are you coming inside?'

I glance at Marcel. 'He cannot. He must go condition.' Marcel spends an hour a day conditioning for lacrosse. He is very dedicated to it.

'Condition?' Kitty repeats, and I know she is imagining Marcel washing his hair.

'I can spend time together for a little bit,' Marcel says, turning the engine off.

'Let us show him the dance!'

‘Kitty, no.’ The dance is something Margot and I made up when we were bored one- night a few summers ago at the beach.

Let us just say neither of us is particularly talented at choreography.

Marcel’s eyes light up. He will take any opportunity for a laugh, especially at my expense.

‘I want to see the dance!’

‘Forget about it,’ I tell him. We are in the living room; each of us has our couch or armchair. I poured us iced teas and put out a bowl of potato chips, which we had already finished.

‘Come on,’ he pouts. ‘Show me the dance. Please, please show me the dance.’

‘That’s not going to work on me, Marcel.’

‘What’s not going to work?’

I wave my hand at his Handsome Boy face. ‘That. I am immune to your charms, remember?’

Marcel lifts his eyebrows as I have dared him. ‘Is that a challenge? Because I am warning you; you do not want to step into the ring with me.

I will crush you, Covey.’

He does not take his eyes off mine for several long seconds, and I can feel my smile fade and my cheeks heat up.

‘Come on, Lara Jean!’

I blink. Kitty. I had forgotten she was still in the room. I scramble to my feet.

‘Cue up the music. Marcel just challenged us to a dance-off.’

Kitty squeals and runs to turn on the speakers. I pushed back the coffee table.

We take our places in front of the fireplace, backs turned, heads down, hands clasped behind our backs.

When the bass kicks in, we jump and turn around. Hip thrust, swivel, then move into- our knee slides. Then the running man, this moves Margot

made up called the treadmill. The music stops, and Kitty and I freeze in our crunking positions- and then it- starts up again, and we are doing the butterfly, then back into the knee slides.

I forget- what the next move is so I sneak a peek at Kitty, who is shimmying and clapping her hands. Oh yes.

Our big finish is split, with our arms crossed for emphasis.

Marcel's bowed over, laughing his head off. He claps and claps and stomps his feet.

When it is over, I try to catch my breath and manage to say, 'Okay, you're up.'

'I can't,' Marcel gasps. 'How do I follow a performance like that? Kitty, will you teach me that pop-and-lock move?'

Kitty gets shy suddenly. She sits on her hands and looks at him through her lashes and shakes her head.

'Please, please?' He asks.

Kitty finally caves in- I think she just wanted to make him work for it. I watch them dance all afternoon, my little sister the ninja and my pretend boyfriend Spider-Man.

First- I- laugh, but then a worrying thought comes out of nowhere- I cannot let Kitty get too attached to Marcel. This is temporary. The way Kitty looks at him, so adoringly, like he is her hero-.

When Marcel must leave, I walk him out to his car. Before he gets in, I say, 'I do not think you should come over anymore. It is confusing to Kitty.'

Frowning, he says, 'How is it confusing to Kitty?'

'Because - because when our - our thing is over, she's going to miss you.'

'I'll still see the kid around.' Marcel pokes me in the stomach. 'I want joint custody.'

All I can think of is how patient he was with her, how sweet. Impulsively I get up on my tiptoes and kiss him on the cheek, and he jerks back in surprise.

'What was that for?'

My cheeks feel scalded. I say, 'For being so nice to Kitty.' Then I waved goodbye, and I ran into the house.

IF I DON'T BUY GROCERIES today, it will be scrambled eggs for dinner tonight.

Again...

Margot's car is fixed and sitting in the driveway, where it has been sitting for the past few weeks. I could go to the store if I wanted to. I do want to. But I do not want to drive.

If I- was a nervous driver before, the accident has only have made me worse. What business do I- have behind the wheel of a car? What if I hurt someone? What if I hurt Kitty?

They should not just give out driver's licenses so easily. I mean, a car is a dangerous thing. It is a weapon.

But the store is less than ten minutes away. It is not like I would be getting on the highway.

And I really- do not want to eat scrambled eggs for dinner tonight. Besides - if Marcel and Genevieve are getting back together, he will not be giving me rides anymore.

I must learn how to do it for myself. I cannot depend on other people to help me.

'We're going to the store, Kitty,' I say.

She is lying down in front of the TV, propped up on her elbows. Her body looks so long; it is getting longer every day. Pretty soon she will be taller than me. Kitty does not look away from the TV. 'I do not want to come. I want to watch my shows.'

'If you come, I'll let you pick out ice cream.'

Kitty gets to her feet.

On the drive there, I am going so slow that Kitty keeps telling me the speed limit. 'They give tickets for going under the limit too, you know.'

'Who told you that?'

‘No one. I just know it. I bet I am going to be a better driver than you, Lara Jean.’

I grip the steering wheel tighter. ‘I bet you are.’ Brat. I bet when Kitty starts driving, she is going to be a speed demon without the slightest concern for those around her. But she will still probably be better at it than me. A reckless driver is better than a scared one; ask anybody.

‘I’m not scared of things like you are.’

I adjust my rearview mirror. ‘You sure are proud of yourself.’

‘I’m just saying.’

‘Is there a car coming? Can I switch lanes?’

Kitty turns her head. ‘You can go, but hurry.’

‘Like how much time do I have?’

‘It is already too late. Wait - now you can go. Go!’

I jerk into the left lane and look in my rearview. ‘Good job, Kitty. You just keep being my second pair of eyes.’

As we push the cart around the store, I am thinking about the drive home and having to get behind the wheel again. My heart still races even as I am trying to decide if we should have zucchini or green beans with dinner. By the time we are in the dairy aisle, Kitty’s whining. ‘Can you hurry? I do not want to miss my next show!’

To appease her, I say, ‘Go pick out ice cream,’ and Kitty heads off toward the frozen-food aisle.

On the way home, I stay in the right lane for blocks and blocks- so I do not have to switch lanes.

The car in front of me is an old lady, and she is moving at a snail’s pace, which suits me simply fine. Kitty begs me to switch lanes, but I just ignore her and keep doing what I am doing, nice and easy. My hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles are white.

‘The ice cream’s going to be all melted by the time we get home,’ Kitty gripes.

-And-

‘I have missed every single one of my shows. Can you please go to the fast lane?’

‘Kitty!’ I screech. ‘Will you just let me drive?’

‘Then drive already!’

I lean across the console to cuff her upside the head, and she scoots closer to the window so I cannot reach her. ‘Can’t touch me,’ she says gleefully.

‘Quit playing around and be my eyes,’ I say.

A car is coming up on my right, zooming off a highway exit. He is going to have to merge into my lane soon. Lightning-fast I look over my shoulder for my blind spot, to see if I can switch lanes. Every time I must take my eyes away from the road, even for a second, I feel so much panic in my chest. But I do not have a choice, I just hold my breath and I switch over to the left lane. Nothing bad happens. I exhale.

My heart races the whole way home. But we make it, no accidents and nobody honking their horn at me, and that is the important thing. And the ice cream is fine, only a little melted on top. It will get easier each time, I think. I hope. I just must keep trying.

I cannot stand the thought of Kitty being scornful of me. I am her big sister. I must be someone she looks up to, the way I look up to Margot. How can Kitty look up to me if I am weak?

That night I pack Kitty is and my lunches. I make what Mommy used to make us sometimes when we went on picnics at the winery in Keswick. I dice up a carrot and an onion and fry it with sesame oil and a little vinegar; then I mix in sushi rice.

When it is- cooked, I scoop pats of rice into tofu skins. They are like rice balls in little purses.

I do not have an exact recipe to follow, but it tastes right enough. When I am finished, I get on a ladder and search for the bento boxes Mommy used to put them in. I finally find them in the back of the Tupperware cabinet.

I do not know if Kitty will remember eating these rice balls, but I hope that her heart will.

AT THE LUNCH TABLE PETE Rand his friends cannot get enough of the rice balls. I only got to eat three. ‘These are so good,’ Marcel keeps saying.

When he reaches for the last one, he stops short and quickly looks up at me to see if I noticed.

‘You can have it,’ I say. I know what he is thinking of. The last piece of pizza.

‘No, it’s all right, I’m good.’

‘Have it.’

‘I don’t want it!’

I picked up the rice ball with my fingers and put it in his face. ‘Say ‘ah.’’ Stubbornly he says, ‘No. I am not going to give you the satisfaction of being right.’

Darrell hoots with laughter. ‘I am jealous of you; I wish I had a girl to feed me my lunch. Lara Jean, if he does not take it, I will.’ He leans forward and opens his mouth for me.

Marcel shoves him to the side and says, ‘Step off, it’s mine!’ He opens his mouth and I pop it in like he is a seal at Sea World. With his mouth full of rice and his eyes closed, he says, ‘Yum- yum- yum.’

I smile because it is so cute. And for a second, just for a second, I forgot. I forgot that this is not real.

Marcel swallows the food in his mouth and says, ‘What is wrong? Why do you look sad?’

‘I am not sad. I am hungry because you guys ate my lunch.’ I cross my eyes at him to show him I am joking.

Immediately Marcel pushes out his chair and stands up. ‘I’m going to get you a sandwich.’

I grab his sleeve. ‘Do not. I am just kidding.’

‘Are you sure?’ I nod, and he sits back down. ‘If you’re hungry later, we can stop somewhere on the way home.’

‘About that,’ I say. ‘My car’s fixed now, so I won’t be needing you to give me rides anymore.’

‘Oh, really?’ Marcel leans back in his chair. ‘I do not mind picking you up, though. I know you hate to drive.’

‘The only way I’ll get better is if I practice,’ I say, feeling like Margot.

Margot the- Good.

‘Besides, now you’ll get back your extra five minutes of sleep.’

Marcel grins. ‘True.’

VIRTUAL SUNDAY NIGHT DINNER WAS an idea I thought up.

I have my laptop propped up on a stack of books in the center of the table.

Daddy- and Kitty and I are all sitting in front of it with our slices of pizza. It is our lunchtime and Margot’s dinnertime. Margot’s sitting at her desk with a salad. She is already in her flannel pjs.

‘You guys are eating pizza again?’ Margot gives me and Daddy a disapproving look.

‘Kitty’s going to stay tiny if you don’t feed her any green food.’

‘Relax, Gogo, there are peppers on this pizza,’ I say, holding up my slice, and everybody laughs.

‘There’ll be a spinach salad with dinner tonight,’ Daddy offers.

‘Can you make my spinach portion into a green juice instead?’ Kitty asks.

‘That’s the healthiest way to eat spinach.’

‘How do you know that?’ Margot asks.

‘From Marcel.’

The pizza slice that was halfway to my mouth freezes in midair.

‘Marcel who?’

‘Lara Jean’s boyfriend.’

‘Wait a minute - Lara Jean’s dating who?’ On the computer screen, Margot’s eyes are huge and incredulous.

‘Marcel-,’ Kitty chirps.

I whip my head around and give her a dirty look. With my eyes, I say, thanks for disclosing information, Kitty. With her eyes she says, What? You should have told her yourself ages ago.

Margot looks from Kitty to me. 'What? How did that happen?'

Lamely I say, 'It just sort of - happened.'

'Are you serious? Why would you ever be interested in someone like Marcel?'

He is such a -' Margot shakes her head in disbelief. 'I mean, did you know Josh caught him cheating on a test once?'

'Marcel cheats at school?' Daddy repeats, alarmed.

I quickly look at him and say, 'Once, in seventh grade! The seventh grade does not even count anymore, it was so long ago. And it was not a test, it was a quiz.'

'I do not think he is a good guy for you. All those lacrosse guys are so douchey.'

'Well, Marcel's not like those other guys.' I do not understand why Margot cannot just be happy for me. I at least pretended to be happy for her when she started dating Josh.

She could pretend to be happy for me too. And it makes me mad, the way she is saying all this stuff in front of Daddy and Kitty.

'If you talk to him if you just give him a chance, you'll see, Margot.' I do not know why I am bothering trying to convince her of- Marcel when it will be over soon anyway. But I want her to know that he is a good guy because he is.

Margot makes a face like Yeah, okay, sure and I know she does not believe me. 'What about Genevieve?'

'They broke up months ago.'

Daddy looks confused and says, 'Marcel and Genevieve were an item?' 'Never mind, Daddy,' I say.

Margot is quiet, chewing on her salad, so I think she has done, but then she says, 'He is not very smart, though, is he? I mean, at school?'

‘Not everybody can be a National Merit Scholar! And there are various kinds of intelligence, you know. He has a high emotional IQ.’ Margot’s disapproval makes me feel prickly all over. More than prickly. Mad.

What right does she have to weigh in when she does not even live here anymore?

Kitty has more of a right than she does.

‘Kitty, do you like Marcel?’ I asked her. I know she will say yes.

Kitty perks up, and I can tell she is pleased to be included in the big-girl talk.

‘Yes.’

Surprised, Margot says, ‘Kitty, you’ve spent time together with him too?’

‘Sure. He comes over all the time. He gives us rides.’

‘In his two-seater?’ Margot shoots a look at me.

Kitty pipes up. ‘No, in his mom’s van!’ With innocent eyes, she says, ‘I want to go for a ride in his convertible. I have never been in a convertible.’ ‘So, he doesn’t drive around his Audi anymore?’ Margot asks me.

‘Not when Kitty’s riding with us,’ I say.

‘Hmm’ is all Margot says, and the skeptical look on her face makes me want to x her right off the screen.

AFTER SCHOOL I GET A text from Josh.

You, me, and the diner-like old times.

Except old times would have included Margot. Now it is modern times, I suppose. That is not altogether a sad thing. New can be good.

OK but I am getting my own grilled cheese because you always hog more than your fair share.

Deal.

We are sitting in our booth by the jukebox.

I wonder what Margot's doing right now. It is nighttime in Scotland. She is getting ready to go out to the pub with her hallmates. Margot says pubs are big over there; they have what they call pub crawls, where they go from pub to pub and drink and drink.

Margot's not a big drinker, I have never even seen her drunk. I hope she has learned how to by now.

I hold my hand out for quarters. Another Lara Jean—and-Josh tradition. Josh always gives me quarters for the jukebox.

It is because he keeps mounds of them in his car for the tollbooth and- I never- have quarters because I hate change.

I cannot decide if I want doo-wop or folksy guitar, but then at the last second, I put in- 'Video Killed the Radio Star,' for Margot. So, in a way, it is like she is here.

Josh smiles when it comes to it. 'I knew you'd pick that.'

'No, you didn't, because I didn't know I was going to until I did.' I pick up my menu and study it like I have not seen it a million times.

Josh is still smiling. 'Why bother looking at the menu when we already know what you're going to get?'

'I could change my mind at the last second,' I say. 'There is a chance I could order a tuna melt or a turkey burger or a chef salad. I can be adventurous too, you know.'

'Sure,' Josh agrees, and I know he is just humoring me.

The server comes over to take our order and Josh says, 'I'll have a slice of grilled cheese and a tomato soup and a chocolate milkshake.'

He looks at me expectantly.

There is a smile coming up on the corners of his lips.

'Ah-um -' I scan the menu as fast as I can, but I do not want a tuna melt or a turkey burger or a chef salad. I give up. I like what I like. 'A grilled cheese, please.'

'And a black-cherry soda.' As soon as the server is gone, I say, 'Don't say a word.'

‘Oh, I wasn’t going to.’

And then, because there is a silence, we both speak at the same time. I say, ‘Have you talked to Margot lately?’ and he says, ‘How are things going with-?’

Josh’s easy smile fades and he looks away. ‘Yeah, we chat online sometimes. I think. ...She is homesick.’

I give him a funny look. ‘I just talked to her last night, and she did not seem homesick at all. She seemed like the same old Margot. She was telling us about Raisin Weekend. It makes me want to go to Saint Andrew’s too.’

‘What’s Raisin Weekend?’

‘I am not a hundred percent sure - it sounds like it was a mix of drinking a lot and Latin. It is a Scottish thing.’

‘Would you do that?’ Josh asks. ‘Would you go somewhere far away?’

I sigh. ‘No, probably not. That is Margot, not me. It would be nice to visit, though. My dad will let me go during spring break.’

‘I think she would like that a lot. Our Paris trip is not happening anymore, huh?’

He laughs awkwardly, and then he clears his throat. ‘So, wait, how are things going with-?’

Before I can answer, the server comes back with our food. Josh pushes the bowl of soup, so it is in the middle of the table. ‘The First sip?’ he asks, holding up the milkshake.

Eagerly I nod and lean across the table. Josh holds the glass and I take a long sip.

‘Ahn,’ I say, sitting back down.

‘That was a pretty big sip,’ he says. ‘How come you never get your own?’

‘Why should I when I know you’ll share?’ I break off a piece of grilled cheese and dip it into the soup.

‘So, you were saying?’ Josh prods. When I stare at him blankly, he says, ‘You were about to talk about-’

I was hoping this would not come up. I am not in the mood to tell more lies to Josh.

‘Things are good.’ Because Josh is looking at me like he is expecting something more, I add, ‘He’s really sweet.’

Josh snorts.

‘He is not what you would think. People are so quick to judge him, but he is different.’

I am surprised to find I am telling the truth. Marcel is not what you would think. He is overconfident, and he can be obnoxious, and he is always late, true, but there are other good and surprising things about him too.

‘He’s - not what you think.’

Josh gives me a dubious look. Then he dunks half his sandwich into the soup and says, ‘You already said that.’

‘That’s because it’s true.’ He shrugs at this like he does not believe me. So, I say, ‘You should see the way Kitty acts around Marcel. She is crazy about him.’ I do not realize it until the words are out of my mouth, but I say it to hurt him.

Josh tears off a hunk of grilled cheese. ‘Well, I hope she doesn’t get too attached.’

Even though I have had that same thought for varied reasons, it still hurts to hear.

Suddenly the easy Josh-and-Lara Jean feeling is lost. Josh is withdrawn and closed off, and I am stinging from what he said about Marcel, and it feels like playacting to sit across from each other and pretend it is the same as the old days. How could it be when Margot was not here? She is the point of our little triangle.

‘Hey,’ Josh says suddenly. I look up. ‘I did not mean that. That was a shitty thing to say.’ He ducks his head. ‘I guess - I do not know, I am just jealous.

I am not used to sharing Song girls.’

I go soft inside. Now that he has said this wonderful thing, I am feeling warm and generous toward him again. I do not say what I am thinking, which is,

you may not be used to sharing- us, but we are very used to sharing you. 'You know Kitty still loves you best,' I say, which makes him smile.

'I mean, I did teach her how to hock a loogie,' Josh says. 'You don't forget the person who teaches you something like that.' He takes a long sip of his milkshake.

'Hey, they are doing a Lord of the Rings marathon at the Bess this weekend. Want to go?'

Continued: 3

'That's like - nine hours!'

'Yeah, nine hours of awesome.'

'True,' I agree. 'I want to go; I just must check with Marcel first. He said something about going to a movie this weekend, and-' Josh cuts me off before I can finish. 'It is fine. I can just go with Mike. Or I will take Kitty. It is about time I introduced her to the genius that is Tolkien.'

I am quiet. Are Kitty and I interchangeable in his mind? Are Margot and me?

We are sharing a waffle when Genevieve walks into the diner with a little kid who I guess must be her little brother. Not her actual little brother; Gen is an only child. She is the president of the Little Sib program. It is where a high school student is paired up with an elementary school kid and you tutor them and take them out for fun days.

I slump down in my seat, but of course, Gen still sees me. She looks from me to Josh, and then she gives me a little wave. I do not know what to do so I just wave back.

Something about the way she smiles at me is unsettling. It is how genuinely happy she looks.

If Genevieve is happy, that is not good for me.

At dinner, I got a text from Marcel. It says, If- you are going to hang out with Sanderson, can you at least not do it in public?

Under the table, I read it over and over. Could it be that Marcel's the teensiest bit jealous? Or is he just worried about how it looks to Genevieve?

'What do you keep looking at?' Kitty wants to know.

I put my phone down, face down. 'Nothing.'

Kitty turns to Daddy and says, 'I bet it was a text from Marcel.'

Buttering a roll, my dad says, 'I like Marcel.'

'You do?' I speak.

Daddy nods. 'He is a good kid. He is taken with you, Lara Jean.'

'Taken with me?' I repeat.

To me, Kitty says, 'You sound like a parrot.' To Daddy she says, 'What does that mean? Taken by her?'

'It means he's charmed by her,' Daddy explains. 'He's smitten.'

'Well, what's smitten?'

He chuckles and stuffs the roll in Kitty's open, perplexed mouth. 'It means he likes her.'

'He likes her,' Kitty agrees, her mouth full. 'He- he looks at you a lot, Lara Jean. When you are not paying attention. He looks at you, to see if you are having an enjoyable time.'

'He does?' My chest feels warm and glow, and I can feel myself start to smile.

'I am simply happy to see you so happy. I used to worry about Margot taking on so many responsibilities at home and helping the way she did. I did not want her to miss her high school experience. But you know Margot. She is so driven.' Daddy reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. 'To see you now, going out and doing things and making new friends - it makes your old man incredibly happy. Incredibly happy.'

I feel a lump growing in my throat. If only it was not all a lie.

'Don't cry, Daddy,' Kitty orders, and Daddy nods and pulls her into his arms for a hug.

'Can you do me a favor, Kitty?' He speaks.

'What?'

'Can you stay this age forever?'

Automatically Kitty replies, 'I can if you give me a puppy.'

My dad roars with laughter, and Kitty laughs too.

I admire my little sister sometimes. She knows exactly what she wants, and she will do whatever it takes to get it. She is shameless that way.

I am going to talk to Daddy and help her cause. The two of us will wear him down.

There will be a puppy under our tree Christmas morning. I had bet money on it.

THE NEXT NIGHT Marcel AND I study at Starbucks for a few hours- well, I study, and he keeps getting up and talking to people from school. On the way home, he asks, 'Did you sign up for the ski trip?'

'No. I'm a terrible skier.' Only cool people like Marcel and his friends go on the ski trip.

I could try to twist Chris's arm into going, but she would laugh in my face. She is not going on any school trips.

'You do not have to ski. You can snowboard. That is what I am doing.'

I give him a look. 'Can you picture me snowboarding?'

'I will teach you. Come on, it will be fun.' Marcel grabs my hand and says, 'Please- please- please, Lara Jean? Come on, be a sport. It will be fun, I promise.'

He catches me by surprise with this. The ski trip is not until winter break. So, he wants to keep this, us, up until then. For some reason, I feel relieved.

'If you don't want to snowboard,' he continues, 'the lodge has a big stone fireplace and big comfortable chairs. You can sit and read for hours. And they sell the best hot chocolate.'

I will buy you one.' He squeezes my hand.

My heart does a little zing, and I say, 'All right, I will go. But the hot chocolate had better be as good as you say.'

'I'll buy you as many as you want.'

'Then you better bring a lot of singles,' I say, and Marcel snorts. 'What?'
'Nothing.'

When we got to my house, I climbed out and he drove away before it occurred to me, I left my bag on the floor of his car, and Daddy and Kitty were not home.

They are at- Kitty is the school for parent-teacher conferences.

I fumble around blindly under the deck, feeling around in the dark for the spare keys- we keep hidden under the wheelbarrow. Then I remember that the spare keys are in the junk drawer, in the house, because I forgot to put them back the last time I got locked out.

I have no keys, no phone, no way of getting into the house.

Josh! Josh has a spare key. He watered my dad's plants for him a few times when we went away on vacation.

I find a rock in the driveway, and I cross the lawn and stand underneath Josh's window.

I throw the rock at it, and I miss it. I find another one, and it pings off the glass, barely making a sound. I will try again, with a bigger rock. This one hits.

Josh opens the window and leans his head out. 'Hey. Did - leave already?'

Surprised, I say, 'Yeah. I left my bag in his car. Can you throw down the spare keys?'

Josh sighs like I am asking for something huge. 'Hold on.' Then he disappears.

I stand there and wait for him to come back to the window, but he does not.

He comes out of the front door instead. He is wearing an a- hoodie and sweatpants.

It is- Margot's favorite hoodie. When they first got together, she used to wear it all the time, like it was a letterman's jacket or something.

I hold my hand out for the keys and Josh drops them in my hand.
'Thanks, Joshy.'

I turn to leave, but he says, 'Wait. I am worried about you.'

'What? Why?'

He sighs heavily and adjusts his glasses. He only wears his glasses at night.

'This thing with-'

'Not that again, Josh-'

'He is a player. He is not good enough for you. You are - innocent. You are not like other girls. He is a typical guy. You cannot trust him.'

'I know him a lot better than you do.'

'I'm just looking out for you.' Josh clears his throat. 'You're like my little sister.'

I want to hit him for saying that. 'No, I'm not,' I say.

An uneasy look crosses over Josh's face. I know what he is thinking because we are both thinking it.

Then, headlights are beaming down our street. It is Marcel's car. He has come back. I handed Josh his set of keys and ran over to my driveway. Over my shoulder, I call out, 'Thanks, Joshy!'

I come around the front to the driver's side. Marcel's window is down. 'You forgot your bag,' he says, glancing over toward Josh's house.

'I know,' I say breathlessly. 'Thanks for coming back.'

'Is he out there?'

'I do not know. He was a minute ago.'

'Then just in case,' Marcel says, and he leans his head out and kisses me on the lips, open-mouthed and sure.

I am stunned.

When he pulls away, Marcel's smiling. 'Night, Lara Jean.'

He drives off into the night and I am still standing there with my fingers to my lips.

Marcel - just kissed me. He kissed me, and I liked it. I am sure I liked it. I am sure I like him.

The next morning, I am at my locker, putting my books away when I see- Marcel walking down the hallway. My heart thumps in my chest so loud I can hear it echo in my ears. He has not seen me yet. I duck my head into my locker and start arranging my books into a pile. From behind the locked door, he says, 'Hey.' 'Hey,' I say back.

'I just want to set your mind at ease, Covey. I am not going to kiss you again, so do not worry about it.'

Oh. ...?...

So that is that. It does not matter if I like him or not because he does not like me back.

It is silly to feel so disappointed about something you only just realized you wanted, isn't it?

Do not let him see that you are disappointed.

I face him. 'I wasn't worried about it.'

'Yes- you were. Look at you: your face is all pinched together like a clam.'

Marcel-

laughs, and I try to un-pinch my face, to look serene. 'It is not going to happen again. It was all for Sanderson's benefit.'

'Good.'

'Good,' he says, and he takes my hand, and he closes my locker door, and he walks me to class like a real boyfriend like we are really in love.

How was I supposed to know what is real and what is not? It feels like I am the only one who does not know the difference.

MY DAD'S THRILLED WHEN I ask him to sign the permission slip. 'Oh, Lara Jean, this is- great.

Did Marcel convince you? You have feared skiing ever since you were ten and you did the splits, and you could not get back up!'

'Yeah, I remember.' My boots froze onto the skis, and I lay there in the splits for what felt like days.

Signing the paper, my dad says, 'Hey, we can all of us go to Wintergreen over- Christmas. Marcel too.'

So that is where I get it from. My dad. He lives in a fantasy world. Handing me the slip, he says cheerfully, 'You can wear Margot's ski pants. Her gloves, too.'

I do not tell him that I will not need them because I will be cozy in the lodge reading and sipping hot cocoa by the fire. I should bring my knitting stuff with me too.

When I talked to Margot on the phone that night, I told her I was going on a ski trip, and she was surprised. 'But you hate skiing.'

'I'm going to try out snowboarding.'

'Just - be careful,' she says.

She means on the slopes, but when Chris comes over the next night to borrow a dress, I learn otherwise. 'You know everybody hooks up on the ski trip, right?

It is like a school-sanctioned booty call.'

'What?'

'That's where I lost my V freshman year.' I thought you lost it in the woods near your house.'

'Oh yes. Whatever, the point is, I had sex on the ski trip.'

'There are chaperones,' I say worriedly. 'How can people just have sex with chaperones around?'

'Chaperones go to sleep early because they're old,' Chris says. 'People just sneak out.'

Plus- there is a hot tub. Did you know that there is a hot tub?'

‘No - Marcel never mentioned that.’ Well, that is that I just will not pack a bathing suit.

It is not like they can make you go in a hot tub if you do not want to.

‘The year I went, people were skinny-dipping.’

My eyes bug out. Skinny-dipping! ‘People were nude?’

‘Well, the girls took their tops off. Just be prepared.’ Chris chews on her fingernail.

‘Last year I heard Mr. Dunham got in the hot tub with students and it was weird.’

‘This sounds like the Wild West,’ I mutter.

‘More like Girls Gone Wild.’

It is not that I am worried Marcel will try something with me. I know he will not because he does not see me that way. But are people going to expect it? Am I going to have to sneak into his room in the middle of the night, so people think we are doing something? I do not want to get in trouble on a school trip, but Marcel has a way of convincing me to do stuff I do not want to do.

I grab Chris’s hands. ‘Will you please come? Please, please!’

She shakes her head. ‘You know better than that. I do not do school trips.’

‘You have before!'

‘Yeah, the first year. Not anymore.’

‘But I need you!’ Desperately I squeeze her hands and say, ‘Remember how I covered for you last year when you went to Coachella? I spent the whole weekend sneaking in and out of your house so your mom would think you were at home! Do not forget the things I have done for you, Chris! I need you now!’

Unmoved, Chris plucks her hands away from mine and goes to the mirror and starts examining her skin. ‘Um-’s not going to pressure you to have sex if you do not want to.

If you minus the fact that he dated the devil, he is not a total dummy. He is decent.’

‘What do you mean by decent? Decent like he does not care that much about sex?’

‘Oh, God, no. He and Gen were in constant heat for each other. She has been on the pill.

longer than I have. Too bad everyone in my family thinks she is this angel.’

Chris pokes at- a zit on her chin. ‘What a fake. I should send an anonymous letter to our grandma - Not that I really would. I am no rat, unlike her. Remember that time she told our grandma I was going to school drunk?’ She does not wait for me to answer. When Chris gets going on a Genevieve rant, she is single-minded. ‘My grandma wanted to use the money she saved for my college for rehab! They had a family meeting with me! I am so glad you stole - from her.’

‘I did not steal him. They were already broken up!’

Chris snorts. ‘Sure, keep telling that to yourself. Gen’s going on the ski trip, you know.

She is class president, so she is organizing it. So just beware. Do not ever ski alone.’

I let out a gasp. ‘Chris, I am begging you. Please come.’ In a burst of inspiration, I say, ‘If you come, it will make Genevieve mad! She is organizing this whole thing; it is her trip. She will not want you there!’

Chris purses her lips into a smile. ‘You know how to play me.’ She just shook her chin at me.

‘Do you think this zit is ready to pop?’

THANKSGIVING DAY, DADDY CLEANS OUT the turkey for me and then leaves to go pick up our Korean grandma, who lives an hour away in a retirement community with a lot of other Korean grandmas. Daddy’s mom, Nana, is spending Thanksgiving with her boyfriend’s family, which is fine by me because I know she would not have anything nice to say about the food.

I make a green-bean dish with orange peel and dill, in an earnest effort to be jazzy and inventive. I nominate Kitty to be my taste tester and she takes a bite of green bean and says it tastes like an orange pickle. ‘Why can’t we just have a green-bean casserole with the fried onion rings that come in the can?’

Kitty ponders. She is cutting out different colored feathers for her turkey placemats.

‘Because I’m trying to be jazzy and inventive,’ I say, dumping a can of gravy into the saucepan.

Doubtfully Kitty says, ‘Well, are we still having broccoli casserole? People will eat that.’

‘Do you see any broccoli anywhere in this kitchen?’ I ask. ‘No, the green in this meal is the green bean.’

‘What about mashed potatoes? We are still having mashed potatoes, right?’

Mashed potatoes. I jump up and check the pantry. I forgot to buy potatoes. I got the whole milk and the butter and even the chives to put on top like Margot always does.

But I forgot the actual potatoes. ‘Call Daddy and ask him to pick up Yukon gold potatoes on the way home,’ I say, closing the pantry door.

‘I can’t believe you forgot the potatoes,’ Kitty says with a shake of her head.

I glare at her. ‘Just focus on your placemats.’

‘No, because if I didn’t just ask about the mashed potatoes, the meal would have been ruined, so you should be thanking me.’

Kitty gets up to call Daddy, and I yell out, ‘Those turkeys look more like the NBC peacock logo than actual turkeys, so!’

Kitty is unfazed, and I take another bite of the green beans. They do taste like orange pickles.

It turns out I have cooked the turkey upside down. Also, Kitty kept hounding me about salmonella because- she watched a video on it in science, so I wind up leaving the bird in too long. The mashed potatoes are fine, but there are some crunchy bits here and there because I rushed to boil them.

We are seated around the dining room table, and Kitty’s placemats do add a certain something.

Grandma is eating a whole pile of green beans, and I shoot Kitty a triumphant look.

See? Someone likes them.

There was a minute or two after Mommy died when Grandma moved in to help take care of us. There was even talk of her staying. She did not think Daddy could manage on his own.

‘So, Danny,’ Grandma begins. Kitty and I exchanged a look across the table because we knew what was coming. ‘Are you seeing anyone these days? Going on dates?’

My dad reddens. ‘Er - not so much. My work keeps me so busy-’ Grandma clucks. ‘It’s not good for a man to be alone, Danny.’

‘I’ve got my girls to keep me company,’ my dad says, trying to sound jovial and not tense.

Grandma fixes him with a cold stare. ‘That’s not what I mean.’

When we are doing the dishes, Grandma asks me, ‘Lara Jean, would you mind if your daddy had a girlfriend?’

It is something Margot and I have discussed at length over the years, most often in the dark, late at night. If Daddy ad to date, what kind of woman would we like to see him with? Someone with a good sense of humor, kindhearted, all the usual things. Someone who would be firm with Kitty but not rein her in so much that it would squash all the special things about her.

But also- someone who would not try to be our mother; that is what Margot is fiercest about. Kitty needs a mom, but we are old enough to not need mothering, she says. Of the three of us, Margot would be the most critical. She is incredibly loyal to Mommy’s memory. Not that I am I am not, but there have been times, over the years, where I have, I have thought about how nice it would be to have someone. Someone older, a lady, who knows about certain things, like the right way to put on blush, or how to flirt to get out of a speeding ticket.

Things to know for the future. But then it never happened. Daddy’s been on some dates, but he has not had a steady girlfriend he is brought around. Which has always been a relief, but now that I am getting older, I keep thinking about what it will be like when I am gone and it is just Kitty and Daddy, and then before long it will just be Daddy. I do not want him to be alone.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I wouldn’t mind at all.’

Grandma gives me an approving look. 'Good girl,' she says, and I feel warm and cozy inside, like how I used to feel after a cup of the Night-Night Tea Mommy used to make me- when I could not fall asleep at night. Daddies made it for me a few times since, but it never tasted the same, and I never had the heart to tell him.

THE CHRISTMAS COOKIE JACKPOT START December first. We drag out all of Mommy's old cookbooks and cooking magazines and we spread them out on the living room floor and turn on the Jack Brown Christmas album. No Christmas music is- allowed in our house until December first. I do not remember whose rule this is, but we abide by it. Kitty keeps a list of which cookies we are making and which ones we are making.

There are a few perennials. My dad loves pecan crescents, so those are necessary.

Sugar cookies because those are a given. Snickerdoodles for Kitty, molasses cookies for Margot, cowgirl cookies for me. White-chocolate cranberry is Josh's favorite. I think this year, though, we should mix things up and make different cookies. Not entirely, but at least a few new ones. Marcel's here; he stopped by after school to work on chem, and now it is hours later, and he is still here. He and Kitty and I are in the living room going through the cookbooks. My dads in the kitchen listening to NPR and making tomorrow's lunches.

'Please no more turkey sandwiches,' I call out. Marcel nudges my sock and mouths spoiled, and he points at me and Kitty, shaking his finger at us. 'Whatever. Your mom makes your lunches every day, so shut it,' I whisper.

My dad calls back, 'Hey, I am sick of leftovers too, but what are we going to do? Throw it away?'

Kitty and I look at each other. 'Exactly,' I say. My dad has a thing about wasting food. I wonder if I snuck down to the kitchen tonight and threw it out if he would notice. He would. 'If we had a dog,' Kitty pipes up loudly, 'there wouldn't be any more leftovers.' She winks at me. 'What kind of dog do you want?' Marcel asks her. 'Don't get her hopes up,' I tell him, but he waves me off. Immediately Kitty says, 'An Akita. Red fur with a cinnamon-bun tail. Or a German shepherd I can train to be a seeing-eye dog.'

'But you're not blind,' Marcel says.

'But I could be one day.' Grinning, Marcel shakes his head. He nudges me again and in an admiring voice, he says, 'Can't argue with the kid.' 'It's

futile,' I agree. I held up a magazine to show Kitty. 'What do you think? Creams Icle cookies?' Kitty writes them down as a.

'Hey, what about these?' Marcel pushes a cookbook in my lap. It is opened to a fruitcake cookie recipe. I gag. 'Are you kidding? You are kidding, right? Fruitcake cookies? That is disgusting.'

'When done right, fruitcake can be really good,' Marcel defends. 'My great-aunt Trish used to make fruitcake, and she'd put ice cream on top and it was awesome.' 'If you put ice cream on anything, it's good,' Kitty says.

'Can't argue with the kid,' I say, and Marcel and I exchange smiles over Kitty's head. 'Point taken, but this is not your average fruitcake. It is not, like, a wet loaf of neon jujubes. It has pecans and dried cherries and blueberries and good stuff. She called it Christmas Memory fruitcake.'

'I love that story!' I exclaim. 'That is my favorite. It is so good but so sad.'

Marcel looks puzzled and so does Kitty, so I explain. "A Christmas Memory" is a short story by Truman Capote. It is about a boy named Buddy and his older lady cousin who took care of him when he was little. They would save up all year to buy ingredients for fruitcake and then they would send them as presents to friends, but also to, like, the president.'

'Why is it so sad?' Kitty wants to know.

'Because they are best friends and they love each other more than anybody, but they get separated in the end, because the family thinks she does not take good enough care of him. And she does not, but it does not matter because she was still his soul mate. In the end, she dies, and Buddy does not even get to say goodbye to her. And it is a true story.'

'That's depressing,' Marcel says. 'Forget the fruitcake cookies.' Kitty crosses out fruitcake cookies on her pad.

I am thumbing through an old Good Housekeeping magazine when the doorbell rings.

Kitty scrambles up and runs for the door. 'Check who it is before you open it,' I call after her. She is always forgetting to check first.

'Josh!' I hear her squeal.

Marcel's head jerks up.

‘He’s here to see Kitty,’ I tell him.

‘Yeah, right.’

Josh walks into the living room with Kitty hanging around his neck like a monkey.

‘Hey,’ he says, eyes flickering in Marcel’s direction.

‘What’s up, man,’ Marcel says, friendly as can be. ‘Have a seat.’

I give him a strange look. Just a second ago he was complaining, and now he is happy as a clam. I do not have boys.

Josh holds up a plastic bag. ‘I brought back your casserole dish.’

‘Is that Josh?’ My dad calls from the kitchen. ‘Josh, do you want a snack? Turkey sandwich?’

I am positive he is going to say no because I am sure he has had as many leftover turkey sandwiches over at his house as we have been eating over here, but then he goes, ‘Sure!’

Josh disentangles himself from Kitty and plops down on the couch. To me he says,

‘Christmas Cookie Bonanza?’

‘Christmas Cookie Bonanza,’ I confirm.

‘You’re making my favorite, right?’ Josh gives me puppy-dog eyes, which always makes me laugh because it is so un-Josh.

‘You’re such a dork,’ I say, shaking my head.

‘What’s your favorite?’ Marcel asks him. ‘Because the list is pretty set.’

‘I’m fairly sure it’s already on the list,’ Josh says.

I look from Josh to Marcel. I cannot tell if they are kidding or not.

Marcel reaches out and tickles Kitty’s feet. ‘Read us the list, Katherine.’

Kitty giggles and rolls over to her notepad. Then she stands up and grandly says, ‘M&M cookies are a yes, cappuccino cookies are a maybe, creamily cookies are a maybe, fruitcake cookies are a no way-’

‘Wait a minute, I’m a part of this council too,’ Marcel objects, ‘and you guys just turned down my fruitcake cookies without a second thought.’

‘You said to forget the fruitcake cookies, like, five seconds ago!’ I speak.

‘Well, now I want them back under consideration,’ he says.

‘I’m sorry, but you don’t have the votes,’ I tell him. ‘Kellie and I both vote no, so that’s two against one.’ My dad pops his head into the living room. ‘Put me down as a yes vote for the fruitcake cookies.’ His head disappears back into the kitchen. ‘Thank you, Dr. Berson’ Marcel crows. He drags me closer to him. ‘See, I knew your dad was on my side.’ I laugh. ‘You’re such a suck-up!’ And then I look over at Josh, and he is staring at us with a funny, left out look on his face. It makes me feel bad, that look. I scoot away from Marcel and start flipping through my books again. I tell him, ‘The list is still a work in progress. The cookie council will strongly consider your white-chocolate cranberry cookies.’

‘Greatly appreciated,’ Ray says. ‘Christmas isn’t Christmas without your chocolate Kiss cookies.’ Kitty pipes up, ‘Hey, Honey, you’re a suck-up too.’ He grabs her and tickles her until she is laughing so hard, she has tears in her eyes.

After Ray leaves and Kellie goes upstairs to watch TV, I am tidying up the living room and Ray sprawled out on the couch watching me. I keep thinking he is about to leave, but then he keeps lingering. Out of nowhere, he says, ‘Remember back at Halloween how you where Marcel and Karly went. I bet you that was not a coincidence. I am a freeze. ‘No, he is not. He loves my sister. He always has and he always will.’ Ray waves this off. ‘Just wait. As soon as you and I are done, he is going to pull some cheesy asses move and, like, profess his love for you with a boom box. I am telling you; I know how guys think.’

Continued: 4

(Past)

Kellie- I yank away the pillow he has cushioning on his back and put it on the recliner. ‘My sister will be home for winter break soon. I bet you a million dollars they get back together.’ Ray holds his hand out for me to shake on it, and when I take it, he pulls me onto the couch next to him. They suck face legs touching and spared out and shit. He has a mischievous glint in his eye, and he is going to kiss me here and there, and I am scared, but I am excited, too.

Footsteps coming down the stairs, and the moment’s over. ‘CAN WE PUT UP THE TREE this weekend?’ Kellie asks at breakfast.

My dad and I look up from his bowl of oatmeal. Oatmeal, ugh. 'I don't see why not.' Unenthusiastically I say, 'Margot might be mad if we do it without her.' Truth be told, I want to put up the tree too. It is so cozy to do Christmas Cookie Windfall and have the lights twinkling on the tree and Christmas music and the whole house smelling like sugar and butter. 'Our family put their tree up the day after Thanksgiving,' Killie says. 'Let us just do it, then,' I say. 'Can we, Daddy?' 'Well, if Barn's family is doing it,' Daddy says. We drive out to the Christmas tree farm an hour away, because that is where the nice ones are. Killie insists on seeing every tree to make sure ours is the nicest one- dad-a.

I vote for a plump balsam fir because it smells the best, but Killie does not think it is tall enough. We go for a Douglas fir instead, and the whole drive home, the air smells like Christmas morning. Karly and Marcel who stayed overruns out of his house when he sees us struggling to get the tree inside. He and my dad heft it up and took it inside the house. He holds the tree up straight as my dad screws the

The Christmas tree stands around it tightly. I have a feeling like he is going to want to stay and help decorate the tree. I cannot stop thinking about what you said Ray said on the phone to me.

How I would like to get over them and we can do things. 'A miniature to the left,' Killie directs. 'It's not straight enough.' I bring down the box with the twinkling lights and the ornaments and start sorting through them.

My favorite is the painted blue star I made in kindergarten out of dough. It is my favorite because there is a bite taken out of it, I told Kitty it was a cookie and she chomped right into it like the Cookie Monster. And then she cried, and I got in trouble, but it was worth it. 'Should we do colored lights or white lights this year?' I ask.

'Where is,' sis says. 'But colored lights are fanciful,' Marcel argues. 'I mean, they're sentimental.' I Kellie roll my eyes, to the goo- goo bull shit. 'Fanciful, Marcel?' And then Josh proceeds to make a case for colored lights, and he and I argue back and forth until Daddy intercedes and says we should just do half and half. This is when things finally feel truly normal between us, now that we are bickering again like old times.

Marcel was wrong about Ray. I feel that in my heart of hearts. The tree is so tall it nearly touches the ceiling. We ran out of lights, so Daddy went to buy more at the store. Marcel puts Karly on his shoulders so she can put the angel on the tippy top seven or more feet or so- up.

'I'm glad we got a big tree this year,' I say with a happy sigh, falling back onto the sofa, spring jabbing me in the ass as I look up at the top. There is nothing cozier than a Christmas tree all lit up. A little later, Daddy must go into the market in town, the only place open, and Kellie goes over to our neighbor's, so we can have our time. Get out of the House because they are making love next to the fireplace, so it is just them and me leaving then?

I go to Ray- I am putting ornament hooks back into their different zip lock bags and Ray is loading up a cardboard box with the ornaments we did not have room for. He hoists the box in harams and knocks into a branch on the tree, and a glass ornament slips off and breaks.

Ray whimpers. 'Ray-ie,' I say. 'I made that in home-ie.' 'Sorry.' 'It is okay, it was not my best work anyway. I put in too many feathers.' It is a transparent glass ball with white feathers and white sequins inside. I get a broom, and when I come back, he says, 'You act differently around the baby. Did you know that?' I look up from sweeping the broken ornament. 'No- I don't.' 'You do not act like you. You act like - like how all girls act around him.'

'That is not you, Kill.' I am annoyed, I say it nicely, 'I act the same as I always do. What would you know about it, Ray? His mom is a dick and dad a pussy, they just fit in will and I get freaked over; you have barely ever even been around us.' I crouch down and pick up a shard of glass. 'Be careful,' Ray says. 'Here, I'll do it.' He stoops down next to me and reaches for another shard. 'Owl is looking at me I said looking at the tree it like the sister loves so!'

'You be careful!' I lean close to him and try to get a closer look at his finger. 'Are you bleeding?' He shakes his head. 'I'm fine.' And then he says, 'You know what I don't get?'

'What the...?'

Ray stares at me, his cheeks a dull red. 'Why you never said anything. If all that time you felt like that about me, why didn't you say anything?' My whole body goes stiff. I was not expecting that. I am not prepared. I swallow hard and say, 'You were with Margot.'

'I was not always with Margot. The stuff you wrote- you liked me before I ever liked her. Why didn't you just tell me?' I let out a breath. 'What does that even matter now?' 'It matters. You should have told me. You should have at least given me a chance.' 'It wouldn't have made a difference, Ray!' 'And I'm

telling you it would have!' He steps toward me. He- I rise to my feet as he holds me up.

Why is he mentioning this now, just when things are back to normal again?

'You are so full of it I say yet I love that about you. You have never thought of me that way, not ever, so do not go trying to reinvent history now when I have somebody.' 'Don't tell me what I think,' he shouts. 'You don't know my every thought, of my sis.' 'Yes, I do. I know you better than anyone. You know why?

You are predictable. Everything you do. It is so predictable. The only reason you are even saying this now is because you are jealous. And it is not even because of me. You do not care about who I am with.

Ray said- You are just jealous that she took your spot, before now... You liked her better than me now... freak no! You are the one baby- you are the one I want to feel and hold and freak hard. His face looks worried. He glares at me, and I glare back. 'Fine!' he yells be that way. 'I am jealous! Are you happy now?' I do her instead- how about that, and then he jerks his head toward mine, and he kisses me. On the lips. His eyes are closed, mine are wide open. And then mine close too, and for a second, just for a second, I kiss him back. Then I broke away. I push him off. We have a crazy love going on.

Victoriously he says, 'Did you predict that, for Karly?' My mouth opens and closes, but no words come out. I drop the broom and run up the stairs, as fast as I can. I ran to my room and locked my door behind me. Ray just kissed me. In my living room. My sister is coming back in a few weeks. And I have a fake boyfriend I just cheated on.

AFTER the THIRD PERIOD, Marcel IS waiting for me. He is wearing a skinny tie today with a V-neck and he has a full-size bag of cheese-it is in his hand. He stuffs a handful of Cheetos into his mouth, and orange dust floats onto his white and yellow bottom down. The corners of his mouth look slightly orange too. With his mouth full he says, 'Look, there's something I need to tell you.' I laugh. 'I can't believe I ever thought you were so refined,' I say, blowing cheez-it- its powder off his shirt.

'What do you need to tell me?' I ask. I steal a few Cheese-it is out of the bag. When he shall, I say, 'Lucas, I hate when people say that they have something to tell you and they do not just say it. It is like when people say they

have a funny story- like, just hurry up and tell the story and I will decide for myself if it is funny or not.' I lick' cheese off his lips. 'Well, you know I live in the same neighborhood as the city, right?' I nod. 'Last night I saw Olivia leaving her house, she was on her today, Maddie and she fights over nothing like always.'

'Oh.' That is all I say. Marcel 'oh.' 'Typically, I wouldn't think it was that big of a deal, but there's one other thing.' Marcel wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand. 'Genevieve and her college guy broke up over the weekend. You know what that means, right?'

I am nodding but I am numb inside. 'Naturally, wait, what?' Marcel gives me a look that is half pitying, half impatient. 'She's going to try to get I back, on him!'

'Right,' I say, and I feel a pang even as I am saying it. 'Of course- she will.' 'Don't let her,' he warns. 'I won't,' I say, and the words come out soft like jam, without any conviction at all. I did not know it until now, but I think I have been counting down to this moment all along.

For an oak view to want hell. For I figured out this whole thing has been a zany little detour and now it is time for him to go back to where he belongs. To the person, he belongs to the past and now it belongs to no one for I know.

I was not planning to tell Marcel a thing about Kellie kissing me, Ray. I was not. But then, as Ray and I are walking together in school again, I see him and Genevieve walking down the hallway. Ray gives me a meaningful look, which I pretend not to see. In chemistry class, I write both notes. Seeing which one would go farthest and comeback with I want you baby or love you. You were right about Ray. Maddie said. I tap him on the back and slip the note in his hand. When he reads it, he sits up straight and immediately scribbles something back. Yet it was not what I wanted, I saw Marcel in the hills, I walked up and he- He kissed me.

I will write about him- and not the other one.

~*~

When Ray strengthens, I am ashamed to say that I feel a little bit vindicated.

I wait for him to write back, but he does not. As soon as the bell rings, he turns around and says, 'What the hell? How did that even happen?' 'He came

over to help us trim the tree.' 'And then what? He kissed her in front of me, my sis?'

'Nope, not at all! It was just the two of us at the house.'

~*~

Marcel looks irritated at this like never- ever before, and I am starting to regret mentioning it. 'What is he thinking, kissing my girlfriend? It is freaking silly. I am going to say something to him.' 'Hold your shit, what? No!' 'I must, Olivia. He cannot just get away with it... can he?' I stand up and start packing my bag. 'You'd better not say anything to him, Ray- I mean it.' Stop fooling around. Jay watches me like a ghost eye going through me- feeling me from the inside and out, like a dick in a vagina feels the climaxing. And then he asks,

'Did you kiss him back?' 'What does it matter? If I did- or did not?' He looks taken back. 'Are you madding at me for something?' 'No,' I say. 'But I will be if you say anything to Ray.' 'Fine,' he says with a deadpanning breath. 'Fine,' I say back.

#- Hashtag: (Who needs boys, or go with a girl it is easier)

part: 8

Hold out your Tongue...

I HAVEN'T SEEN Ray kissed me as Marcel does, but when I get home that night from studying at the library, I see the old book for the old one, I sit there and he rubs my leg and up parts of me in-between the girlie heart-shaped of non-shaved hairy-ness, and the poop-shoot. Why...? Why... did God put the snack bar so close to the bathroom, (he grabs at her goodies, Ray said. '-Nice!' The boy over yonder said- Nice! Looking like I got some of that! He is sitting next to me a navy top, waiting for me to move to his hand. The bell rings out and I want to shout it out. (What a way to beat around the bush... I thought. He- he.)

~*~

The lights are on, but you are not there, your mind is not your own, going must face it you addicted to love. In the house, my dad is home. Killie bedroom light is on doing the nasties like always now. God, even I am not that horned up...

Cut- aw-ah- her face made a look of something I can put into words- the door bangs as she runs and calls me a creeper! Moving on to my room, I think

about doing what she is... ah, not- IDK- yet I may get on the cam and chat. I do not know yet. HI boy- HI! It is ME!!!! LOVES! DID YOU ALL MISS ME- MAH-KISS! The kiss was blown to all the viewers with eyes on the screen and one hand on the mouse and the other you can guess for yourself. Now- I like this one- I singing aloud for my baby boys now: I am selling records...

What is it that you do? Sitting in your mama's basement with a shiatsu, Peanut butter on your dick, your right hand going click, while the dog is giving you a rim job! You are nothing but a WANNA BE! I would rather go on avoiding Ray, but here he is, at my house. 'Hey,' he says. 'Can I talk to you?' I sit down next to him and look straight ahead, across the street. Ms. McChild's put her Christmas tree up too. She always puts it by the window near the door so people can see it from the outside. 'We must figure out what we are going to do before Margot gets here. It was my responsibility for what happened. I should be the one to tell her.' I stared at him in doubt. 'Tell her? Are you nuts-o? We are never telling Maggie because there is nothing to tell her she is just out of the click of teen life.'

He puts his chin out. 'I don't want to keep a secret from her.' 'You should have thought of that before you kissed me!' I hiss. 'And for the record, if anybody were going to tell her, it would be me. I am her sister. You were just her boyfriend. And you are not even that to any further extent, so...' Snow flashes across his face and it stays there. 'I was never just Maggie's true girlfriend... Do I ponder the thought, of why and how and who...?'

This is weird for me, too, you know. It is like, ever since I got that letter...' He shilly-shallies. 'Forget it about it all I don't get why boys forget it all, and everything, and whatnot.' 'Just say it now that you can, say now!' I speak. 'Ever from the time when I got that letter, things have been messed up amid us. It is not fair. You have to say everything you wanted to say, and I am the one who must rearrange the way I think about you; I must make sense of it in my head. You blindsided me, and then you just shut me out. close me up and out like always- that is what boys do- get in and back out fast, and see you cry as they runoff.

You start dating Ray again, you stop being my friend.' Said Olivia. (Oh, you want to get into his boxers too?)

In the Café- Marcel hears this- He exhales. I going to- well- go- eat over her.

‘Endlessly since I got your letter, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.’ He spoke.

What a bunch of lines- crappie-ness!

Whatever I was expecting him to say, it was not that. It was not that.

‘Ray.’

‘I know you don’t want to hear it, but just let me say what I need to say, okay?’ I nodded.

Part: 9

Say Ah!

And welt the crying... coming on... or something like that. ‘I hate that you are with him. I hate it like you now. Said Olivia. He is not good enough for you. I am sorry baby girl it is right- what I said it is not right to keep whoring around. When you have a good guy that- well I think is madly in love with you. Then but Maggie on top- like get it right- and fugue shit out. One is all you need to feel the love!

part: 10

Rhapsodize...

Say it, but he is just not. No guy will ever be good enough for you. Least of all me.’ Ray drops his head, and then suddenly he looks up at me and says, ‘There was this one time, it was a couple of summers ago. We were walking home from somebody’s house, as well as Marcel.’ It was hot, around dusk. I was mad because Marcel’s older brother Markus had said he had given us a ride home that was not all it was said to be, the room needs good cleaning and fresh sheets, yet we did it on them anyway- gross.

I was dissatisfied- I hope I am not pregnant. Let us get a sandwich, and then he went somewhere and did not come back, to get my undies hanging on the door handle, so we had to walk back to Maddie’s place. I was wearing heels and my feet were heartbroken like I felt so terrible. Ray kept telling me to keep up with him, and not be a pain in the ass baby, that he should dump, for sucking- and not freaking right. He said I will not even tight... Awah! I want Marcel right now! I need a hug, and a loving kiss, to make it feel aright- what did I do?

~*~

Vociferously he says, I call Marcel to get me as I fall behind to get away from his mouth and many hard slaps in the face. There he was with his dads-

2016 Stingray Corvette, why would I give that up too? He said- 'It was just me and you. he had on that light blue shirt I got him, and an under top I used to wear when sleeping over with him at night and need a night top to roll in or be seen in by his mom and dad, I would have all and everything off in his bed of cores, look at you your shown your belly button, and have your butting hanging out, can the top get and tighter?' Stop doing what he asked, he used you like Jenny.

Oh, how I loved that shirt. 'I almost kissed you that day since we have been apart from your photo on my PC. I thought about it. You and I all the time now, it was this weird impulse I had. I just want to see what it would be like again yet put this on. And- well run!'

My heart stops. 'And then?' The heart-shaped ring looked like hers, 'And then I do not know. I guess- I forgot about it- us.' Did you forget? I let out a sigh.

'I am sorry you got that letter. You were never supposed to see that. It was not meant for you to ever read. It was just for me, to say it was you to do and show.' I loved you long before he even thought about it- okay stop freaking up- I love you!

'It was fate. This was all supposed to materialize just like this, because it was always going to be you and me.' I say the first thing that comes to mind. 'Nope, it wasn't.' And I comprehend it is correct. This is the moment I realized I do not love him, which I have not for a while. That I never did. Because he is right there for the pleasing: I could kiss him again; I could make him mine. But I do not want him. I want someone else. It feels strange to have spent so much time wishing for something, for someone, and then one day, suddenly, to just stop.

It all stops fast- and I look back and see all the mistakes. I run my fingers inside my jacket sleeves. 'You cannot tell Maggie about all of this. You must promise me, Marcel.' I said I lift her for you only. Reluctantly he nods.

And the day ends with us making up and talking it up.

'Has Maggie been in touch with you recently?' I asked him.

‘Yeah. She called the other night. She said she wants to hang out while she is home. She wants to go to DC for the day. Go to the Smithsonian, get dinner in

Chinatown.’ ‘Great. Then that is what you will do.’ I pat him on the knee and then quickly take my hand back. ‘Josh, we just must act like before. Like always. If we do that, everything will be fine.’ I repeat it to myself in my head. Everything will be fine. We will all go back to our proper places now. Maddie and the one we did want in our groups yet had to babysit Maggie.

part: 11

After School, Special...

AFTER SCHOOL LET'S OUT THE next day, I went to look for Marcel in the weight room. He is sitting on the bench press. It is better to talk here and not in his car. I am going to miss riding around in his car. It was starting to feel like home. I am going to miss being somebody who is pretending to be a girlfriend. Not just somebody's- James. I have gotten to like Danny and Gabbie and the other Lexie and all the kids at the other table next to us. They are not as douchey as people say.

They are good people...

The weight room is empty except for Danny. He is at the bench press, lifting weights. When he sees me, does he smile? ‘Are you here to spot me?’ He sits up and wipes the sweat off his face with the collar of his T-shirt.

My heart squeezes painfully. ‘I am here to break up. To fake break up, I mean.’ Dan does a double take at me want it and all. ‘Wait. What?’ ‘There is no need to keep it going. You got what you wanted, right?’

(A week before Jenny passes)

Jenny- You saved face, and so did I. I talked to Marcel, and everything is back to normal with us again. And her sister will be home soon.

So, I do not know if I will get it over beforehand, So, my mission is accomplished I will see you tonight then-, won't I? Or else.’ He slowly nods. ‘Yeah, I guess if that how it has to be.’

Karly- My heart is breaking even as I smile. ‘So okay, then.’ With a flourish, I whipped our contract out of my bag, like my compact. ‘Worthless and

void. Both parties have hereby fulfilled their responsibilities to each other in endlessness.' I am just rattling off lawyer words.

I am not going to cheat on her... you know that.

'You carry that around with you?'

'Of course! Killie's such a snob and creeper. She would find it in two seconds.'

I hold up the piece of paper, poised to rip it in half, but Marcel grabs it from me.

'Wait!

What about the ski trip?'

'What about it?'

'You're still coming, right?'

Marcel- Jenny only made him envious of me.

Karly- I had not thought of that. The only reason I was going to go was for Marcel. I cannot go now. I cannot be a witness to Dan and Jenna's reunion, I just cannot. I want them to come back from the trip mysteriously together again, and it will be like this whole thing was just something I dreamed up.

'I'm not going to go.' Can he call her Jenna...? That is cool, I would, and my tongue would be up to my ass. Yet that boy will do anything for and look over all the shit she hates about everything- and anything.

His eyes widen...

'Come on, her chest and lower! It is what guys just do, we know your eyes are up there, yet it is a guy thing we just do, blame the monkey theory I do not buy into if you want to be a hairy ape that is on you! Ape- transited is harry woman- nice right? Yet- you can pound this shit to me into me in class, yet I cannot say a prayer- well freak you!'

Do not bail on me now like last night. We already signed up and gave the deposits and everything. Let us just have that be our final hurrah.' When I start to protest, Dan shakes his head. 'You're going, so take this contract back.' Dan and carefully put it back in my bag. Why? Why is it so hard to say NO to him? Is this what it is like to be in love with somebody?

Marcel, Karly, Maddie, Killie, Olivia, Maggie, and Shy- we all say that... Jenny would freak anybody!

True? Yep! -Slut!

Morning rays-

'Today is beautiful us  

The sun comes up and it is off to the rink, for practice.

(About a week later)

I finally got to do something for me and did my ice-skating tournament. Yes, I am a twirling girl! I have a short start in white, and everything. Marcel is going to be on the stand all he can do is fall on his ass on the ice. I GET THE IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) DURING the morning announcements when they announce that our school's hosting this event, and not that Jenny is gone I can do what I want, and no one is going to stop me from this one is for me. I will do me now!!! It is at Penn State University event this weekend.

Be there!

Cheer me on!

The show, I get everything right on, churched it! I did a dibble lux and a triple seal cow, and the fast spin with my head back and leg up at the end. To Titanium piano argument I sing the cover! I wonder if I am the only one that can do this at my schools, I am good. It just like lying there taking it to me at this point it is all in my head. Before any of the guys sit down, I get a perfect score, and first.

I was the happiest girl in the world- even mom said an excellent job! Dad, you will get it! I beat out all the girls in my class!

Part: 12

Ice and Heat

Jenny asked- 'Do you know if Marcel still does love me?' He gives me a funny look when I walk by, I wonder why. 'How should I know, said the girls?' 'I do not know- why I can ask, can't I? I was just wondering, JEEZ.' 'Why?'

'I am going to go to the mall tonight, do you want to come?

This weekend is going to be shit! I have a feeling that he will be there if I go to the food court.'

Karly- 'For real?' - 'Back off!' - 'If he is, what are you going to do with him?' - 'Or the better question is what are you going to do to him?'

Jenny- I have not figured that part out yet. I will go up to him and hug, kiss, and feel his junk, I will not. I just want to see how he turned out. We can look him up online right now and I will show you he got my name there not yours. Karly- Hacker! - Sucker - Slut!

Maddie and Olivia- we both shake our heads, and look politely away from the boy drama, ha- that is why we were gay!

Karly- No! He would be cheating on me bitch! You bitch!

Maddie- Stengel the little weasel!

Olivia- Chock out the freaker! And no not that way either you both do that enough! I want to see him with my own eyes open.

Maddie- I want to be surprised. Bye- well everything.

'Well, do not bother asking me to go and keep you then, or to take you places anymore, if I can have it my way, you will not have me. I am not going to waste an awhile Saturday and Sunday crying over you I got plans too. You will see when I get back what is going down.'

Jenny- Okay, do not do something you regret me.

Karly- Suck it!

Coming to you-

Chapter: 4

Preparation...

(Up to the day)

Karly asking Marcel- 'I wasn't planning on asking you to go.'

I threw him a hinting look. Why not? - 'What- now?

'It is just something... I want to do for us.' - 'So-o we can stay us, and no one can break us.'

Marcel- Let us go after this... (Bell)

He let out a low whistle, as we were running for the door. 'Huh?' I need my handbag, and I have a change for when we get there.

Marcel- Let us move, there are eyes on us!

Chapter: 5

Phase...

Karly's thought- 'My daily objective is less about goal achievement and more about regret management.' #- Hashtag: (Aim Low)

Lunch- where are Marcel and Karly? The girls asked.

Jenny- I do not care about her...

Jenny- We are not even broken up yet!

Maddie- Besides, you are already trying to talk to other guys. Like why do you care?

Jenny- Why? Why do you care?

Olive- does not sound stupid to you now.

Maddie- Yes, yes it does! - 'Dumb freaking- fools look what you could have had!'

Olivia thought- I would be hurt if I were not impressed. That was deep! And I get it, do not be so dumb and not see what you could have had. And what your end by being you, and that is selfish, condescending, and thoughtless. I would say- 'I get that' - a-load.

Maddie- This makes me smile.

The drama is never- ever over here a big- clit!

Chapter: 6

Clear and Blue...

(Confession)

Lily Anderson- In seventh grade, I kissed at a party. It was not a romantic kiss. It was barely anything kisses... We were playing spin the bottle, and when it was his turn, I held my breath and prayed the bottle would land on me. And it

did! Long and slow- It almost landed on Nevaeh. Luck was on my side that day, and she was mine and I got everything I hoped for.

I tried to keep my face very still and whole-hearted so I would not smile, and bump teeth yet I felt her boobs and vagina my hand went down her paints, I found out she was not wearing an underwire. And a sports bra, she and I crawled into the center, and we did this very quick, yet everyone looked at the magic moment we have with more than just a peck on the cheeks and lips even if that what happened also, and everybody groaned, and her face was red.

And I was wet, and so was she, I was not disappointed, that night we did things that you would love to hear about; like- Eating her out, and using my Twisted Love Glass one blue and clear, on her and she did it back, as I had the small end in my other whole, that must girl call an exit only, I say no if it feels go to you. Yet it is all in what you like, I did it to her and she was in love with me and that too. She came to me too, on my open lips! I was rubbing in- between her hips, with my hands fast and then slow, until it would ago. We have nude-ie photos too... see our Polaroids! I would drink it down; I got her too also... and it was so cute to me.

She is so cute to me!

Chapter: 7

Stargaze...

Hey U.

Maggie- me back in the old- old days... my quote: 'You get bored you eat, you get lonely you ate, that was my old life- eating out everything I could get my hands on, to stop the pain of not having.'

Lily Anderson- I think I would expect something more than just a kiss with more weight to it. But that was it. I will get a second chance. To do it all over I would not change a thing, yet you know that already.

I have had my love... what more can I say now it is time for me to fly away.

Karly- It will make me forget about you, all of them together, and never- ever come back!

~*~

Angelina Penelope- I have dated Marcel and Karly. AS I WALK INTO SCHOOL on Monday morning, I do not see either, I go over what I am going to say.

Maybe if I ask around some... I will find out. Hey, Quela- Anna, how are you?

Have you seen so and so? Like them, I see a lot of faces in the halls as I walk past.

Hi- Emma, hey she said.

Hi- Harper, what is up she said?

Hello- Ava, high five Yō- Madison a wink and a thumbs up.

Hey-a- Noah, he smacks my ass, as I pass.

Isabella- gives me that drop-dead look! Rolling her eyes like freak you in the ass hole! Or the other one you pick!

Bonjour- Benienie, hey!

Aiden- he looks and walks by shyly; he likes me- weird!

Jackson- cute but not my type, or Karly's either. Hey gay he where his hair and the closes that he has on is so not now.

Liam- is Liam- see for yourself, do not let me inferences you.

Scarlett- Ha- she a slut! Funny right.

Charlotte- dropped her book, thanks to Tom.

Stella- the fat girl- drinking at the water- fountain, slurping it up, ow-ha! (Those things are gross, the gay PE teacher said to wash are pit's using those, I say no think you!)

Violet- is doing just that now!

Elsa- is running to take a piss!

Hudson- slamming a locker door.

Ezra- is getting shoved into one.

Declan- looks at me like he wants to freak on the floor.

Acedia and James- well there about doing that now!

It is Tom, Lara, and they said no to seeing my two weirdo friends and Exes. I have not seen him since the eighth grade.

Chapter: 8

Daybreak...

Angelina- What if he does not recognize me, I look at Ray? What if he does not even remember me? Yet he is sucking on her face now and it is pissing me off. I scan the sandwich boards in the lobby, and I find his name under All-purpose Assembly. For the upcoming prom, I bet Karly and Marcel will go together! I am not sure... but I think he has already asked her. It was all over her face, when they kissed at her locker, the day before.

The General Assembly is meeting in the auditorium. Look and you can see there are desks set up for each, they and you can do to be part of... it is so cheesy and sits girl back many years, but hell that is the point right. Next, they say get naked and have a pillow fight!!! Te- he! We delegate, and onstage there is a podium where a girl in a black suit is making a speech, on why we should not get some after, yet that the point there too. That way the girl does not wear underwire underneath and if you must piss you can drop and go! Got it? - Good.

See you at prom!

~*~

(The first year)

Karly- I am thinking I will just slip in the back and sit and watch but there is nowhere to sit, so I just stand at the back of the room with my arms crossed and look for Marcel. There are so many people here, and everybody is facing the front, so it is hard to tell the truth.

I was at the middle school said for some event over there and a kid in a flotilla suit turns around and looks at me and whispers, 'Are you, Karly?' He is holding up a folded piece of paper. 'Um- oh- okay.' I am not sure what a page is, and then I see a girl hustling around the room delivering notes to people.

The boy thrusts the piece of paper at me and turns back around and scribbles in his notebook. The note is addressed to me saying I need to take him to his bus. I see all the snotty-nosed rug- rats at their tables sitting in alphabetical order, so I just start wandering around trying to find this other girl

that I must button her pants and shit. I must do all the volunteer work or get kicked out, for no good reason. Other people are raising their hands, calling out names I just want to bell- run away to the bathroom and smoke or do something other than this shit! Before long I am hustling too. And hunted by the voices inside me like before. From behind I see a boy's hand raised for me to pick up his note, so I hurry forward, and then he turns his head just slightly.

In addition to that- oh my freaking God- he shits- his undies, and now it is my job to clean that shit, I think not! I run my ass out of the home economics room so fast your head would spin. A few feet away from me, was the band room and I get to run and sat in there playing a random ass trumpet and nobody even noticed. I could shave a sick up to my pussy and I do not think anyone one blink or think about anything. I did not cut as much as I did- yet this one- I just had to. I should do that...? I can blow hard!

Do I want kids?

I love them only if they were mine...

What do you say to that?

~*~

Tom- has sandy hair, clean-cut. His cheeks are rosy, just the way I remember. They still have that fresh-scrubbed wholesomeness that makes him look young. He is wearing denim and light green and pink button-down with a white T-shirt underneath. He looks thoughtful, engrossed like he is a real delegate, and this is not pretending. Honestly, he looks just the way I imagined he would know that he that I would call all grow up to look.

I am holding the piece of paper, one being a love note passed around, out for me as he takes notes with his head down, he is shy, and it said I hurt you on it. I reached for it; my fingers closed around the paper, and then he looked up and did a double take.

'Hi,' I whisper, flirtingly.

Maggie is the one that passed it- We are both still holding on to the note. And she gives me a shy eye also! She likes me more than he does.

'Hi,' she says back. She blinks, and then he lets go of the paper, and I hurry away with my eyes the teacher does not bitch, my heart pounding in my ears. From both she and he, I hear him call out my name in a loud whisper, and then her, I do not get how I got so popper after the party last week, I just got

child that all. But I do not slow down. No time to think... I look down at the paper and see more than one boy's number and where to hook up. His handwriting is neat and precise. I got his note back saying- yes.

All my afternoons and nights were going to change from that day on.

~*~

Olivia's little sister moves back from her dad's place, and is now going to are a school, instead of where she was: Olivia- age- eleven- taller and smart, blond, and careless for now. All legs and long arms. Big hands too! I just saw Ray. After all these years of freaking on an off, I finally saw him my Ex and I do not want to I know I end up doing sad things. And he knew me, I am easy, for him. Right away he knew who I was, and it was all over me. You know all over me. I got a text from him around lunchtime. I have been moving back and forth between homes and the school ever since I was little, they cannot get their shit together.

Walkout into the hall, I see a boy pass- I remember everything.

Did you see Ray?

'No-how that freak- are you and- why do you even ask, dumb little shit!'

Okay...? Thanks...

I type back yes, but then I delete it before I hit send. Why do I do this to myself, I need back in... I write back instead, all over and say- to me. I am not sure why I did yet I get why I would not. I just want to keep it for myself and be happy knowing that he remembered me, for me and not the fast- freaking sex, where I get bent and pounded, and have that be enough. Or my doing all the work on- top!!!

~*~

WE ALL GO TO Marcel, and he picks up Maggie from the airport. The day she moved here, and Kellie made a sign that says Welcome Home sing, we did know at this time that she would be classed as uncool or swagger-less. I keep my eyes peeled for her, and when she comes out, and I am ready to hug, I almost do not recognize her for a second- her hair is short! It is cut in a bob! When Margot sees us, she waves and she runs to my arms and I kiss her cheek, and Kellie drops her sign and runs toward her also. Then we are all hugging, and Daddy has tears in his eyes, for she is all grown up for when he saw her last, she

was in Pampers. 'What do you think?' Maggie says to me, good to see you love your hair now. I have not talked to you more than on the video chat.

It was an awesome day!

The day that: I fell for her!

~*~

'It makes you look older,' I lie, and Maggie beams a glow at me. If anything, it makes her look younger, but I knew she would not want to hear that. On the way home, she makes Daddy pull over at Clouds for a cheeseburger, even though she says she is not hungry. 'I've missed this so many senses then,' she says, but she only has a few bites and Karly has the rest.

I am excited to show Maggie all the cookies we made, but when I take her into the dining room and show her all the tins, she frowns. 'You guys did this for me you're the best.' I feel a little bit guilty, but I honestly did not think Maggie would mind. I mean, she was in Ohio, doing more fun stuff than baking cookies, and being in the city.

We saved half the dough in the freezer, though, so you can still help us bake the rest for the neighbors.' I opened the big blue tin so she could see the cookies layered, and we had to. School ends tomorrow. If we had waited for you, we would not have had time. All- lined up in rows. I am proud of how they are the same size and height. 'We made some new cookies this year. Try an orange creamily; it is good.' Maggie picks through the box and scowls. 'You didn't make molasses cookies?' 'Not this year... We decided to do orange creamily cookies in their place.' She picks one up and I watch her bite into it. 'Good, right?'

She nods...

So- do I- 'Mm-hum.'

'Those where Kellie's pick.'

And also- mine...

Maggie- glances toward the living room, TV?

Sure...? We say... Maggie- Movie?

'Okay!' We say...

'When did you guys do all this for me?'

‘Killie couldn’t wait,’ I say, and it sounds like an excuse, but it is true. I try not to sound self- justifying as I add, ‘I think it’ll be nice to enjoy the tree for as long as we can.’ ‘So, when did you put it up?’ Unhurriedly I say, ‘A couple of weeks ago...’ Why? Why- is she in such a bad mood now? ‘That is so long ago.

It will be dried out a little in the memories of the past.’

~*~

Maggie walks over to me and her, the moves are playing under the blanket we are that is the first time I feel that way about her. I see that my sis wants to be- in-between and somehow this feels like a fight, and we never fight. But then Maggie yawns and says, ‘I am sleepy. I am going to take a nap.’ Aah- and I said come to my bed and I will join you! ‘Okay!’

When someone has been gone for a long time, at first you save up all the things you want to tell them. Yet here in the bed I had nothing to say it wall a coming out in the touching and feeling. You try to keep track of everything in your head, yet I forget everything, even what I have for breakfast.

Nonetheless, it is like trying to hold on to a fistful of sand: all the little bits slip out of your hands, and then you are just clutching air and grit. That is why you cannot save it all up like that. Because by the time you finally see each other, you are catching up only on the important things, because it is too much bother to talk about trivial things. I want to get all said- yet I do does not know how to as of now. But then again, the trivial things are what make-up’s life. Like a month ago when Daddy slipped on a banana peel, a literal banana peel that Kitty had dropped on the kitchen floor. Killie and I laughed forever and never- ever wanted to stop.

~*~

I should have e-mailed Jenny about it right away; I should have taken a picture of the banana peel. Now everything feels like you had to be there and oh never mind, it is not that funny.

‘If you are with her, you can be seen with me- she said back.’ ‘Why?’ I simply asked.

Jenny- ‘Don’t ask I don’t shit’n have to give you away!’

Maggie- read it- and said I should go back?

I said hell no- well be friends regardless of what she says.

You will be my dirty secret.

Okay... she was crying.

Chapter: 9

Spell...

Karly- Marcel, your such an ass!

Marcel- That is right I am your ass- hole!!!

Is this how people lose touch? And feel when they get back in touch? I did not think that could happen with sisters- like friends of the past. With other people, but never us. Before Maggie left, I knew what she was thinking without having to ask; I knew everything about her, it had not changed, on the way Jenny felt, friends- Not anymore forbidden. I do not know what the view looks like outside her window, but I went up to it anyways and saw the city, she still wakes up early every morning to have a real breakfast, or if now that she is at the high school, she likes to go out late and sleep in late.

~*~

(I am a girl... just a girl... so- out of the group.)

Saniya- All I know is she likes her classes, from what I can see, I am in this with her, she does not like all the teachers' ways and how dumbed down all the crap is to do, and she has been made to do this, like us all, so basically, I know nothing.

Pammie- I think sometimes though, there is usually a helper in the class, because all the people in the class who can do the work but do not want to, they take all the teacher's time, so they cannot help other people who need it.

(Half a year)

Maggie- Here is what I say: I feel worthless... I had to write a mission statement the other day in the study hall, special education room and this gal must come in and help me, and I must think about what to write. As well as I feel like she is staring at me all the time, this girl that is far gone I do not like this... I get my shit done in the end; I do not need your help!

In addition to I must give me some ideas as if I could not think for myself and said because this assignment was on values do you want to be a selfish person or unselfish person and I took a moment because some people have

called me selfish before, and before... a few seconds she is selfish is thinking only about yourself and unselfish means thinking about others first, and it is like duh-Uh, you think I am that retarded. They do not teach me anything, I just sit and do nothing all day and think about what I am missing. It is hell...!

I personally, just feel depressed like special- Ed has ruined my life. and then during my IEP meeting the IEP director was like well what do you want to go to college for, and I was like pre-medicine or being an Rn if I must and she was saying like you know we all have dreams, but some are just not going to be possible and look at other majors and what are you good at. It needs to end, put me whit the others so I can have a life, now and someday. Hey, I know exactly how you feel, I have been through the same situation.

Special Ed's teachers sitting beside me all the time and taking me to another room to do the work, even though I was perfectly fine doing it on my own. It is very embarrassing and humiliating. I always felt that I would learn better doing it myself, and learn to cope on my own, but none of them understood. I also felt different from other kids, like I was from another planet or something. But anyway, in one of my Special Ed English classes.

My English teacher noticed that I could achieve better work and being in the normal classes- yet they will not let me go into them, so she rang up my parents to ask them if it was okay never- ever getting out, and then I eventually, I will never get moved into the normal classes. I become exposed for one hour!

And it backs it to the small little dumb ass room.

Maggie's- mother- So really, I just work as hard and tell them that you feel a little embarrassed being taken out of classrooms, I am sure they would understand. Tell them that you want to learn on your own and whenever you do need a bit of help, just ask someone.

Karly- do not give up! Is there any way you or your parents could suggest a move into a general education classroom for more parts of the day? Or could it be determined that you do not need that aide coming in to help you?

It must be hard if she is rushing and giving you suggestions when you are just trying to think. And about college - keep pushing for what you want! Plenty of colleges have supported all types of learners, and if you need a little extra help, you will always be able to find it.

Even so, chances are if you are motivated by pre-med, you will do fine in the classes, because you want to learn about it. So, let your other teachers,

parents; and anyone else know that you want to do pre-med... they cannot push you into something you do not want to do!

Maggie- You do not get it unless you go through it- and live it!

'Once you are out of school you can be anything- I hear it all the time I nothing no, how the freak- will I be anything, when I get out? And have nothing to fall back on.'

Karly's Mom- That's rubbish does not listen to them you can be whatever you want to be in life. Do not let these people make you feel inferior, you will have to do a year extra, but you can follow your dream. I had to attend a special education math lesson, it was awful I felt like a fool as the weekly tests where 'there are 5 balls in this circle color 3 of the balls green and 2 balls red' I understand how you feel and no you are not stupid at all.

'I get that you like playing with balls- I can do this shit!'

Do not let the education you are getting destroy your dreams. You can be everything you want to be, I am proof of that. It did take me a lot longer to get here but I am glad I did not listen to the people who told me. 'There is no chance on god's green earth that you can ever do that!'

What a girl named Anna said to me, she thinks she is smart- Welcome to the world thinking just because you are different you must be mentally retarded. I get this all the time. Not that there is anything shameful about being mentally retarded...not at all. But then again it is frustrating to be 'dumbed down,' no matter what your IQ is, to begin with. Know this... your life is not ruined. We all get challenges, every one of us. As for this person telling you to forget about medicine or nursing... blow her off and go for it. If someone tells you something like this again, say, it is my right to try, yes? And so, does she... there are important things, I have not told her- how my letters got sent out.

Jessie- I hate being in Special- Ed classes!

I am enjoying High School so far but, my English and Global History class are both Special Ed. I find some of the kids to be stupid in the classes and feel like I should not be in there. My average in English has been 91, 92, 88, and 95 so far. My average in global has been an 89 this entire year.

I want to get switched out of these classes and be with normal kids, but my parents and teachers do not seem to believe that I am capable enough. Also, it is not considered cool to be seen in Special Ed classes. It is also very

embarrassing to be seen in Special Ed classes when my friends are in regular classes. Does anyone know any way I could convince my parents, or teachers to get me out of these classes? Btw- (by the way) I am not insecure, I am just really losing my patience with my school. I just do not feel like I am there, I am all locked up in a room with no one to be a friend on the outside, or in here.

Normal boy- Bob- Getting an A in a special education class is not at all the same as getting an A in a regular non-special education class. (Is that say then why to be here, I ask?) Why? Why- can I be like you I can out-do you motherfucker? You need to learn to write also and keep your mouth shut.)

If you don't understand classwork in those classes, the teacher can provide some help, (B- freakNG -S, all they do is make you feel dumb and inferior for being you, no help is there, don't you get that, show me what they do? For I can see it!) Nevertheless, I must move on to teach the rest of the class- who DOES get the material. They cannot stay with you until you exactly understand something in your way. (This is what you get with these kids, yet they cannot even put a coma in their texting. And their grammar is less than that of first graders.)

Karly- You need to figure out why the authorities think you are crazy. Once you know that you can act like you are not. Maybe earn a better grade and such. Maggie- I am just a puppet on a string.

BS! THIS IS WHAT I GET! BS! 'People who are your friends will not ever care what classes you are taking. It would be much more uncool to get held back in high school (which regular Ed can do) while all your friends did graduate and leave you still in high school having to keep attempting classes.'

You are NOT GOING TO HAVE SHIT OR A LIFE, like who is going to hire you in your town, know you are the freaked up sped kid, retarded, dumb or not worth living life, how do you get a job when you are hated? And how do you get schooling when you had none to build upon when you drop up to get harassed.

You do not make money with a job... you can do anything; how do you get that...?

Answer that freaker! When you took it away from me... and yes it was you not me- I not the bad girl!!!

Spell this- F! U! C! K! Y! O! U! (Both fingers up) what does that say! I can read it, can you?

~*~

Ryan- 'I am male and 16 and I find them very patronizing and treat me as if I were Retarded. It is humiliating. (SORRY - It depends on the teacher. There are some good ones out there and unfortunately, like life, there are some that are sour.) One of the things that I hate is being pulled out of class to do something that I am quite capable of doing on my own. I was wondering if there is a way that I can prove them wrong so that I can be like everyone else (are you demonstrating that you can do it? If they do not see it, then they may be pulling you out to work on the skills... when my students demonstrate the skills, I am not pulling them from other classes. You may also want to express your concern... If I must be pulled, can you, do it _____ time?')

'Maybe if you would just keep us in the mainstream class, we learn something... think about that on before you say we can get anything right or learn.'

I was wondering how to get off my IEP. It is embarrassing to be ridiculed for being in special Ed and everyone standing up for you like a retard and trying to defend you. I did not know I was in Special Ed because I thought Special Ed was the all-day class. No! NO- it is not all day. It can be for almost any type of issue. To get off the IEP you need to test out or your parent- guardian must come in and sign out. However, before I recommend it to anyone, I would look at academic success- yes, the dreaded grades- behaviors, and participation in class. If you are getting 'Ridiculed' let your teacher or admin know.

You have the right to a safe and secure environment. Some people may argue that it is a form of bullying. You can always take the approach you are working in smaller groups... so-on, I wish that I can cure my disability and be normal, but no Technology is not that advanced enough. I hate having an aid it is embarrassing to me I do not want to be retarded. I also have this relay mean like head special Ed's teacher which I hate.

I would like to know how I can be normal and get out of special- Ed because I am missing some fun other classes for normal people too. I have also ridden on the short bus which was humiliating- as well- I have an autism spectrum disorder and mental retardation may be to better understand... you should find out the disability classification and research it. They want to help you find coping skills and development skills. Technology may be the thing to help compensate for the deficits that may be visual to society.

Teacher: Just drop out or deal with it!

I say: 'freak YOU! DIE!'

Teacher- I am surprised your district does not allow you to have a say at your IEP annual meeting. I would speak to your parents and teachers so they could get some insight into your opinions about your goals for the year. Stand up for yourself if you feel that strongly about it. It will not be done if you do not say anything.

I say: 'KISS MY ASS!'

Plus- saying, you should die does not mean I need help with my emotions, you sick twisted freak!

~*~

They say- If you are in the US, your parents need to agree with you. They would need to call a new IEP meeting and request changes. You may be able to get moved into some regular classes like history, art, gym, and be in some special Ed classes like English and Math.

(Not if you are railroaded into it- sing or going to a dumb ass school or dropping out and tapping yourself on the head the rest of your days. Nut they class you!)

What the kids think all of them- 'If you're in special Ed you probably need to be there!'

I say freak you, you do not get it, and you would never- ever- ever- ever, last a day as me!

You would kill yourself, that is not a bad idea for you and your mouth, you do that for saying shit like that! That is what you think about me... right?

UM-hum!

Chapter: 10

Whereas...

Karly- Yes Marcel makes me orgasm over and over, you would love to feel and see what he can do to me. I was feeling how that was all belling up in my G-spot and coming out hard thick and watery. I get the milky type coming out of me with my clit being jacked about by his hands or mine, white- Sh when it is going in and out, and clear when I squirt hitting the right spot. Do not stop-

do not stop we did it for three hours not stopping just coming. Until I can take another.

Maggie- That is what I thought...

The truth about me is starting to show if I like it or not. The truth about me... or so you think. Do you like me now?

Or would you hate me now?

Would you turn your back on me if you saw me?

I know you would all do!

Do you get that?

Do you...?

Do not be heartless, yet some of you will giggle and say yes, she gets what she deserves, I do not deserve this... I- we do not.

~*~

Are you just as freakED as me? I do not think so, normal kids... I do not think so, and getting freaked in the ass, here is not what I am saying, just so you can comprehend that one.

Karly- I wonder if Maggie feels it too. The distance between us. If she even notices. Daddy makes spaghetti Bolognese for dinner. Kitty has hers with a big pickle and a glass of milk, which sounds terrible, but then I take a bite, and pickle and spaghetti taste good together, milk, too. Maggie is about to crack, I see it all over her face, as she sits next to me. Kellie's dumping more noodles on her plate when she says, 'Liv, Jean, what are you going to get Ray for Christmas?'

I glance at Maggie, who is looking at me. 'I do not know. I had not thought about it.' 'Can I go with you to pick stuff it out?'

Um- not if the girls go...

Um-

Karly- 'Sure if I get him something, more, I can do it two times.'

Maggie- 'You have to get him something; he's your boyfriend.'

Karly- 'He not my boyfriend... he just a friend that is a boy that I do things with.'

Maggie- 'I still can't believe you're dating Marcel.'

I- NO!

Karly- They do not say it, they think- like it is a good thing.

'Can you just... not?' I say anything at all.

Karly- Umm- when a girl says stop when she just had fourteen orgasm's stop means give me on more until my legs shack my hip thrusts upwards, and my body covers- with your hands, jerking back and forth fast, it is just that right movement, girls get it. OH- away! And a girl can teach a guy how to do this, and let it build and heighten then it is one after another orgasming drizzling all over me, and its warm and feels good, as it drips down my vagina into my but cracks- it- it runs in its sticky-ness. Aww-ahh-Aa! (Do you see this?)

My ass just vibrated; someone just followed me on Instagram. I do not know them yet that all right, they love me, and I get that. I do not always back yet that what a popular girl does.

~*~

Maggie- 'I'm sorry, I just don't like the people that take shit about me.'

Madilyn- I pass the field, and I see the band at practices, and they are playing 'We Are Young!'

(One week before the crash)

'Well, you do not have to like him. I do,' I say, and Marcel shrugs. I think you should be with me and not him.

I asked- Why?

Why? If you do not get it, then never- mind- go!

~*~

Chapter: 11

Break...

(The first week of me dating a girl)

Karly- Daddy stands up and claps his hands together. 'We have three distinct kinds of ice- cream for dessert! Pralines and cream, Chunky Monkey, and strawberry. All your favorites, I said to her, you remembered- she said. We were at this little train station that is converted into an ice- cream stand. Sitting out under the lights, late on a school night.

Maggie looks out the window of the taxi, toward the house. 'Josh wants to see me later. I hope he finally gets that we are broken up and he does not try to come over every day while I am home. He needs to move on.' What a mean thing to say.

She is the one who has been calling Josh, not the other way around. 'He hasn't been yearning for you if that's what you're imagining,'

I speak. 'He gets that it's over it and me too.'

Maggie stares at me in surprise, like this was some shocker. 'Well, I hope that's true.' 'I THINK WE SHOULD do a recital party this year,' Maggie says from her spot on the couch.

(Christmas 0-12)

Maggie- People would drift in and out of the piano room and sing along, and Maggie and I would take turns playing. When my mom was alive, every Christmas we would have what she called a recital party. She would make tons of food and invite people over one night in December, and Margot and I would wear like dresses and play Christmas Carols on the piano all night long. I hated piano recitals because I was the worst in my age group and Maggie was the best.

Kellie- It was humiliating to have to play some easy 'Für Elise, and reindeer' while the other kids had already moved on, I was banging the piano. I always hated recital parties where you can drink or drug it up, old fart shit. I used to beg and beg not to have to play. (Now I miss those days.)

Last Christmas, Mommy bought us matching red velvet dresses to wear, and I threw a fit and said I did not want to wear it, even though I did, even though I loved it. I just did not want to have to play the piano in it next to Margot. I screamed at her, and I ran to my room and smashed the door, and I would not come out. Mommy came up and tried to get me to open the door, but I would not, and she did not come back.

People started homeward bound, and Maggie started playing the piano, and I stayed upstairs. I sat in my apartment room, lousy and philosophical about all the dips and little canapés Mommy and Daddy had made, and how there would be none left for me, and how Mommy did not even want me down there anyway after the way I would behave.

Maggie- After Mommy died, we never had another recital party.

Kellie- 'Are you serious?' I asked her.

Karly- 'Why not?'

Maggie shrugs her shoulders to the side- then up and down, rolling from one side to the other side. 'It will be fun. I will plan it all, you will not have to do anything.'

Karly- 'You know I hate the piano.' Stay with me is something I have been working on here and be nice.

'Then I play the whole thing.'

Kellie looking at me like- what the shit- was that?

Maggie's worried eyes looked at me for she knew how it was for. Biting her lip, she offers, 'I will do, before I leave her for him again. 'Moves time? - Lost in New York?'

Alone at home, funny!

I like it when he gets fired, like in 101 when his balls do.

Maggie reaches out and cuddles me with her hug and hands, and says, 'that is a great idea. I will play the piano and you will make tea or coffee- no can do, Olivia, and I will just- be a' 'Watching,' I finish, Jen will not be here if Maggie is.

Going out with the girls... nice fancy place and crap!

'I was going to say entertainer but suit yourself.'

I do not answer her, she was not worth it to me nob, ass bitch!

We eat.

We dance-

Maddie farts... and yah-

You get it.

I pass it out my mouth nonetheless, loudly.

That is the point to make sense.

Karly- I remember the start of my first year with Maggie after the day of her coming back to me, she, and I both got our clits piercing matching on our first date. (Do you want to see it? She unbuttons her jeans and pulls down the undies gummies- band at the top with her thumb exposing her jewelry going through her clitoris.) we were around fourteen at the time... fake ID is and having an older girl to get you into the tattoo shop. The guy doing was more than happy to pier our fourteen-year-old clits. Look at that face! (I wonder what went through Marcel's mind the first time he saw that?)

It was not long 'till I feel and saw what he thought!

Yes, you know it thinks about that going back and forth un and down with these oral movants. The sensitive is instant cummie's, in his face and mouth!!! And yes, I am a squatter that shoots it far!!! You like that! Do not lie!

UM-HUM That is what they all say!

Ant I cute?

There too right...? Why do you think I got this? It holds the hood skin back a good bit, which I heated with a passion for myself. You get that... don't you?

Maggie was reluctant at first with the idea, yet afterward, what more than pleased with what it could do for her and I. Even she said, I am not that type of girl. What type of girl are you to do something pleasurable, thrilling, and stimulating for you and your lover? Think about how hard you are coming and going to just freaking going to gush-h!

'Um-? Okay-? If you say so- for you!'

It is something that we shared that no one ever knew about...

-Until the day I died, and it was all showing, and Maggie's Dr. said Hey I see that one before. And she told her boyfriend, and it got around. Everyone was shocked shitless, nonetheless, yet happy for her... for have balls, which they never saw, that I gave to her.

~*~

Later, we are watching TV, and Kitty is asleep, curled up on the couch like she is a real cat.

Margot wants to wake her up and make her go to her bed, but I say just let her sleep, and I put a quilt over her. 'Will you help me work on Daddy about a puppy for Christmas?' I ask. Maggie groans. 'Puppies are so much work. You must let them out to pee like a million times a day. As well as they shed like cracked. You will never be able to wear black pants again.'

Also- who is going to walk it, feed it, and take care of it?' 'Kellie will. And I will help.' 'Kellie is so not ready for the responsibility.' Her eyes say, and neither do you. 'Kellie's matured a lot since you've been gone.' And so, have I... 'Did you know that she packs her lunch now? And she helps with the laundry? I do not have to nag her to do her homework, either. She just does it on her own- on her own like always.' 'Really?

Then I am impressed.' Why can't she just say, excellent job, oh and Liv and Jean?

Thanks for not showing... when I did my shows, that is it.

Maggie- If she could just acknowledge that I have been doing my part to keep the family going since she has been gone, her my real mom. But no. Hell no I am moving in with Karly I said to her- 'fine go!' she yelled...

Chapter: 12

Replica...

Maggie- The high school ranking never- ever dies unless, even if you are out- that is if you are on Facebook, for the group are never die-off on there, do you see it like stupid high school games, for who does this and that, and I do not care to see. Even if you want to change their mind, you are not your status to them never well change its all in their made-up minds not too.

-Did you see Madilyn? She changed her hair to more of a reddish color! She looks so good! Said Oliva. I like this color to change this time. Yet, that here change her colors all the time. Black tanks with low armholes in down to her butt spending time together short shorts frayed hanggie's things on them, and today look form now on you can see her tummy and back, bra showing on the side, brighter red ends on her locks, waved out, and dark burgundy on the top, new gray-blue contacts, and big long lashes, black eyebrows, cat eyeliner, pale makeup, soft pink lips that she said matched the other set of hers, emo yet

sweet. You can look cute and be in the dress code, so freak it she said by doing her hair and the skimpy top and bra showing along with her butt cheeks in the back.

I get a kick out of Killie stuffing her bras to look full and wearing my dress, top, and so on, she looks like a little lady. With her honey-brown hair, and short yet all their flirty look, she has a nicer ass than me. and like us she knows that if you have blue eyes, you get laid, so I see her doing that when she wants to be more like us, my dad does not like it, he wants to keep her a little girl.

I get that he lost me too to this look and slutty act that boys want. I see her sometimes going braless and having one strap down on her dress just to turn it on, the boy just thinks she is small, and small chested, I swear to you she passes as one of the high schoolers. I see Kellie's wrights on her hands saying, about love or what she thinks it is, and some days to big nerdy glasses, that I cannot stand, yet I glad she where or she looks to erasable to all of them, that want it and all of her- young, and these boys like um- young like her and tight.

This is coming from the girl that is not so any longer, yet I am not Jenny that is gapped like the grand. I worked in, if you want to call it that, like a good pair of shoes, and you want to wear them all the time because they feel tremendous. Exactly right so Marcel says... Okay... if you say so...? He is the one that opened me up and in so many ways that is one of them. I come so much I lose a jean size as I wear to yah, I need to eat something, God I am crapping up-shit.

~*~

'All a boy should do when a girl is horny on top, pushing it down- when she legs side to side... all in... and sliding- kneeling- why, yet somewhat sitting-like into it, lay there and take it, forget this... they're not moving much, that just to shut you up, but again- girl, that's all you have to do when he is on top of you, with your head in his chest going deep.'

Its SIX THIRTY IN THE morning the day of the ski trip, Daddy drops me off at school. It is not even light out yet. It seems like every day the sun takes longer and longer to come up. Before I hop out of the car, my dad pulls a hat out of his coat pocket. It is light pink yarn with a pom-pom on top. He fits it on my head, so it covers my ears. 'I found this in the hall closet. It was one of your mom's. She was such a great skier.' 'I know. I remember.' 'Promise me you'll go out on the slopes at least once.'

‘I promise...’

‘I am so glad you are doing this. It is good for you to try new things.’ I smile weakly. If he only knew what went down on the ski trip, he would not be so gladdened. Then I spot Marcel and his friends messing around outside by the charter bus.

‘Thanks for the ride, Daddy. See you tomorrow night.’ I give him a peck on the cheek and grab my duffel bag. ‘Zip up your coat,’ he calls out as I shut the car door. I zip up my coat and watch his car drive off. Across the parking lot, Marcel’s talking to Killie... (wah-wah-Awah-wawa-aha)

Ray says something that makes her laugh. Then he sees me and gestures at me to come over. She walks away, looking down at her clipboard. When I get there, he takes my duffel bag off my shoulder and puts it next to his. ‘I’ll put this on the bus.’

‘It’s freezing look at this go there small yet pointy,’ I say, my teeth chattering. Marcel pulls me in front of him and puts his arms around me. ‘I’ll keep you warm.’ I look up at him like he is so cheesy, but his attention is somewhere else.

He is watching Karly. He snuggles against my neck, and I squirm away from him.

‘What’s with you?’ he asks.

‘Nothing,’ I say what...

Ms. Tibbitt and Coach White are looking through kids’ bags- she is doing the girls and Coach White is doing the boys. ‘What are they looking for?’ I asked Marcel.

‘Alcohol.’

I whipped out my phone and texted Ray. Do not bring alcohol, wink- and if you do find a place to hide it! They are checking! Nope- no response. Are you awake?

Wake up! I say!!! But then her mom’s SUV pulls into one bay of the lot and her blunders and stumbles out of the passenger seat. She looks like she just woke up.

What a release! Marcel can talk to me all he wants; I will be sharing a seat with Ray and eating the snacks I packed. I have strawberry gummies and the wasabi peas that Ray loves, and Pickie sticks.

Marcel groans. 'Ray is coming- so he is coming for you, why do you need me to come then?' I ignore him and wave at her- the girl crush. Karly standing by the bus with her clipboard when she spots me too. She has a big frown on her face. She marches right up to me and says, 'You didn't sign up... why?'

It is not my thing...? I said unenthusiastically.

'Come on- I- do- things for you!' She said timidly...

Maggie- Karly gave me a full makeover and now she is a cute rock looking girl looking like a younger Avril Lavigne, also the day I got her ring, she mine. Even snapping her top teeth into fang- points, colors in her hair.

Karly- that is right- I broke her glasses and did her hair and make-up and said keep it this way and you will look so hot to me. Eyes smoky, nails painted, and hair color changed. Eyebrows plucked, and new undies that were mine. Brown hair to blond-haired person, what a change it just works. Dissension lashes, blue contacts, and extreme extensions do so much- LIKE OMG! Do you see her- now!

'I am a conundrum wrapped in a rattle' That is how I would say it.

I want my Lizzy doll again, stupid- '!>this girl here<!' Fingers pointing at all me they do not need to I do it to myself, yep all me this one. Um, hum- knee rubbing and award movants needed. Please... do not look at me... um God- shit!

Chapter: 13

Bygone Preceding...

(1943)

The train pulled into the Clearfield station, and the steam was rushing around my face. The moment has arrived, the moment I was so long for... hoping she would make it over, and that I would get away with this one, I knew if some find up, I will end up over there or shot in the face with no mercy. This how she got her name- the hope for this little girl's life.

He is handsome, man that walks up to me, a lawyer or judge for the county, the last name black, the mothers were- only seventeen over in France, yet was Jewish, the mother ran... the boxcar holding her to her beast, she sees

the engineer and said please take her as yours on this trip back. Overall, the rails, passed the Gestapo and or Nazi past Germany dripping in blood drip- drip covering the lands.

~*~

So my predicament, is an abuse of my Right to Have Rights, could have turned out far worse than in WW2, however, looking at history, and me being Polish as well, this was the same predicament that all Polish people faced, in appeasement, and so I think Polish Jewish people in WW2 had a far harder time mentally than people from other countries, both experiencing the same rights abuses, but Polish people were mentally abused as well, and not only by the Nazis but also by the English and Americans, which whenever some people disagree with me that I say that I remember perfectly that I was not born there, psychiatrists say.

'You're not Polish- then what have I said to myself one dad -Digging for answers, you're just psychologically abused, We're doing that,' which is not true, and the 'right to have a right' is not the same thing as 'having rights questioned' which the latter is just rights abuse period, but when someone promises rights to me and then abandons me when it matters, then that is not them questioning my rights at all, it is a Nazi form of teasing! I was undoubtedly born in here in us... so-o why do you care now what the freak happens to those that had it coming, it never did- they say.

NO.

The Holocaust was the worst human rights atrocity, but what was happening to me in Canada in the '90s was not as bad but had the potential to be far worse because: what was happening was that people were talking to me about my rights issues in private like on a podium, pretending that others were involved in a private discussion, and then the people who were talking to me that way abandoned me when other people were around.

~*~

I remember the trains and talk of the communist party - I never saw anything but trains. Do you see it? The term, 'holocaust' can mean anything. According to dictionary.com, a holocaust is 'great or complete devastation especially destruction by fire.' You may have heard the term 'nuclear holocaust' thrown around; this definition would apply to that term.

So- I am half Jewish do you heat me for it now that you know me?

This is all I paid attention to in school for it applied to me.

Do you see it...?

~*~

'There are several books and films dedicated to this horrendous event in history I have them all I think; it would take me hours to explain it all. I was privileged to go there in my- freshman year of high school; our docent was a Holocaust survivor and he told us about what went on in the concentration camps.'

'The Jewish Holocaust during WW2 is sometimes known as 'Shoah' began in the late 1930s. The Wannsee Conference was held to bring together the 'Final Solution,' which was to get rid of Jewry finally. Adolf Hitler, the German dictator of Germany, was an anti-Semite.

(Meaning ALL were hated.)

As well as required to get rid of Jews for the motive, that he felt that they were Communists, betrayed Germany during WWI, and a lot of other injudicious causes.

He and his Nazi party prearranged a revolutionary group known as the SS (the Schutzstaffel) to round up the Jews, put them into ghettos, and then camps.' The first Nazi ghettos were never intended to be more than temporary, an interim concentration of Jews pending a decision concerning what the 'Final.

'A solution of the Jewish Question' was going to be. That decision went through many convoluted changes before its ultimate determination.

Ghettos- The ghetto was not a Nazi invention. Its origins can be traced back to medieval times when restrictions on the places where Jews were allowed to reside were commonplace throughout Europe. Although this restriction is usually perceived as relating to towns or cities, it even applied in certain cases to entire countries. The policy towards the incarcerated Jews also changed, as the realization dawned on the Germans that a locked-up labor force could be placed to better use than sweeping snow, or breaking rocks.

Later, the ghettos served as convenient points at which to concentrate that Jewish labor force before its liquidation. Not every town had a ghetto. Hundreds of ghettos were established in Nazi-occupied Europe, ranging in size from the 445,100 inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto to those containing just a

few families in rural quasi- ghettos. And I think being sex slaves for them also... think about it was easy butt and puss- puss!

I can see this girl, being held down agent her will, do not you, and just getting freak hard well there was a gun at her hand, well he said f*ck me or die, and if you die, I f*ck you anyway.

So, she does what he said, and he pops her in the head he walks away, as they come is dripping down her dead body. I should know she was one of my past grandmothers. Do you see her being shot doing without him blinking I can, do you? And then moves over to the seven-yard and does the same, she is nude and calls for her now-dead mother, yet his dick in her vagina and she gets pop and popped, do you get it. I can see her... now... do you... like an angel to me- with dark hair and soft skin, and blue eyes, small looking just like me at her age, that she is and the is seven.

The official name is, Kaiser-Richter Schúlz!

This makes my skin crawl!!!

(I wonder why- I was heated- like her... that is why?)

Why?

Is there a why? Or a reason for it...?

He cried and had never asked my grandparents forgiveness that was not slatted off by him, and he got it- yet I am not giving it.

(Back to the story)

Men with guns, and death in the air. Plans in the air and steering to their death. Pass and clear pass all the inspectors, we did- I said in relief, as I was sweating hard over having a smuggled baby on my lap, that was odd to have in the front parts of a locomotive, it over getting out to change the tracks, I was not happy about leaving her with others, yet I have no choice but to do so. Overall, the trains, mountains, and tunnel are the horn blowing hauntingly in my mind as we got closer to home.

I knew my wife would be thrilled, for she could not have children of her own, you see... she wanted a baby girl, and one was just handed over to me I love her as my own. It is my secret, not even she really knows the truth, or the baby that is my wish to have it that way, understand me! Passing time-worn tree, and faces, uniforms and girls not realizing what is going on over there, SS

officer- (was it him- did he let her go out of remorse? I sure he knew... her- he looked right into her little chubby face.)

'Where is this train going Mr. Ansley'- he said to me. 'I don't think that is any over your business!' And he had his pistol drew ready to pull, as I released the handbrake, and the wheels spun as they do fast and the chugging- building up speed, as I kicked him out the opening doorway, on to the now moving tracks.

The firefighter was on my side think God, saying babies do not need to be killed, he had the coal shovel rad hot ready to fight for her life also. There- I see it approaching me at the green station, my wife wearing for me not knowing if I am coming back to her, and yet look what I must bring- to her along with me. I take up to three weeks for a later to get to her, which is a lot of worry time, isn't it?

Ansley- I ran the troop train poor buggers, some of you might not make it back, I do not want to look as I pull forward all young like seventeen, and they wave to me, getting in the cars. This is what he did- driving his train that I see every day in the sky tracks. -I Push the reverser Johnson bar forward - grip the exceptionally large lever that rises from near the floor in front or beside you, squeeze the release handle and shove it all the way forward, and let go of the release handle to lock it into place. Open the cylinder cocks - find a medium size valve in front of you on the boiler, or a thin lever on the floor in front of you.

Turn the valve all the way clockwise or pull the lever back. Turn the front headlight on - above you on the ceiling, there will be a large, flat, half-round box on the side of the cab wall. Slide the knob on the round side of the box to the front. Blow the about-to-move-forward whistle along with two shorts and a long - there will be either a cable, cables, or whistle handle, above your head or in front of you on the boiler. Pull down the cable (or turn the lever) twice to make the steam whistle sound out two short blasts.

Release the engine brakes - two brass horizontal levers will be near your left hand. The top one must be moved from right to left to release the brakes on the engine. Open the throttle to start the engine moving - the exceptionally long lever in front of your face is the throttle. Grip it firmly and give it a yank toward you.

As you feel the engine move slightly, shove it back most of the way so that it does not gather speed too fast. Gradually open throttle as the locomotive approaches track speed. Observe cylinder cock exhaust and close them when

only steam is emitted. Move the Johnson bar slowly back toward vertical, but never too close to vertical.

This is like the gear shift of your car and admits less steam per cylinder stroke. In turn, this increases the efficiency of steam usage, so you do not overwork the poor guy throwing coal into the fire (and to conserve fuel and water!) If the locomotive's wheels slip, close throttle most of the way immediately. Allowing the wheels to slip will not render any tractive effort and will damage the locomotive if done continuously (also 'tears' holes in a coal-fired locomotive, or an oil-burning locomotive, can cause hollow booms much like an explosion.)

Blow the whistle and ring bell at all crossings of all types and DO NOT EXCEED TRACK SPEED. That is extremely dangerous.

~*~

The signaler hands her to me, as I step on the train, and the next engineer takes over for my 18 hours off the rails, no- does come in handy along with coffee, do not want to sleep. Her- the new baby was stolen from sure death at the camps. Jewish- surely, destiny for the death pits or gas shower rooms or fireboxes at Auschwitz the death camps, I can see the nude body run around for them now, shaving head, injection in the eyes, and more for the perfect race.

All blue eyes in what they wanted, the babies Hope- and the photos of the past in black and white. She was saved from, her real family that was killed off, we are no; hitherto she never did, she never had any US paperwork. She was adopted illegally, and her new dad worked for the Pennsylvania railroad, she went over that burgh too like I did, on the same engine that is sitting there rusting away. In the same car that I did things in... it is so weird to me. The story keeps going on...

My wife happy yet not content, yet I loved her like my own... I hope she knows that when I left her for my job.

(The first year)

Mailbox- 'Working on my fantasy of what I SHOULD have said to that FedEx girl who gave me attitude.' Yah- so suck my pussy! I thought and then stop in my walking- God I am not that gay!

Tv- 'So that Stouffer Mac & Cheese and is saying 'Buy our product to make your annoying daughter shut the hell up for 2 seconds!' God! AH! #- hashtag- (Family)

'Our- rooms are never clean- anyways- so- why to bother cleaning it, my mom is always bitching about it anyway. So- why- bother, even- if it is clear to me.'

'Do not worry about me. I am covered.'

We showered together and did all things like that, together also, never apart.

When I give her a dubious look, she whispers back, 'Shampoo bottle filled with tequila at the bottom of my bag.' 'I hope you washed it out well! You could get sick! If you go outside and make snow angels or take to people that are not there again.'

'When is that terrified- of- everyone- I- don't- know feeling going to go away?'

I bob my head up and down and try to look enthusiastic, even though a little, pinching feeling of guilt starts nipping at yours truly. I have not even thought about the evaluations since this pre-launch, not since I found out the results would be discounted. 'Yeah, you're right.' 'Come on, now. Dinnertime.' My aunt reaches out and passes a finger over my forehead. Her finger is cool and reassuring and gone as quickly as the lightest stirring of wind. It makes the guilt flare up full force, and at that moment I could not believe it, I was even considering going to Back and Gold Cove.

Me after I cook anything at all- 'I'm the best person in the world!'

I am fat- 'Bitches got to eat, okay?' *I* 'Serious question: How much are wedding cakes...? And how weird would it be... like- if I wanted to buy one just to eat? By myself...?'

~*~

'They say you should not meet your heroes. And they are right because I met a baby raccoon once and it pooped on my shoulder.'

I look at me- and the showdown in the black show is all, the girl looks happy you see the showdown deep, of secrets, isolated and inappropriate with herself and her world. I always look so sad just like me, not acting it all out.

Boy's- 'Yes, of course, I got your text - I am just ignoring it. Do not make it weird.'

~*~

Facebook- Twitter- 'Does anyone else think 'don't be a weirdo, don't be a weirdo - over and over when entering social gatherings? Cause I do not. You are right.' * -- * 'You're wrong, just don't want to seem like a dick about it.'

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 28

Heart-to-Heart's

'Dedicated to the girl, that plays in my mind.'

...And, to my dad rest in peace, Raymond 'Buddy' Duriez, 1957 to 1993.

Quote- 'I feel LOVE for people, that I have loved, and that is so beautiful, I think that's such an important lesson for children, that people can have disagreements,' but it does not mean one is bad, and one is good. The worst would pain over not smelling and tearing over it.'

-Anna Kendrick

Interval

Kellie-

The climax of you-

My most prized possession Kelly passed on- hell's- yes, I wanted it! I recall saying- she said- I cannot have this thing in my room or Jenny is going to mucky swing it and break it for me. You can have your N-word BOY-sh baby shit rip- you can have your pc beats I think too. The world has gone crazy passing up this or it smashed?

Yes, plain real shit is gay, or so her friends said- like- to her to give it up. They said that she could never- ever wrap her hand around the neck of a guitar and play like she does, okay she did this- It was said to me, and I now have this to show you and play- that my grandmother, had this made.

A Gibson guitar pink body into lavender- and this was the neatest thing a 17 inch with body, 17-inch body height, and a nick 18 inches long, with four skews holding it on the form the back; and the dumb-looking to me and you, but right for a girl I feel that it is... a custom nick for her with other parts made to fit her tinny body parts and hands so you can rap the nick, wood- tick and heavy yet no over- and hard- nock- nock- nock, yet semi-hollow, and the sin custom pickups that you can know about- 2 humbuckers. She wanted to make it sound like mom's finder yet better.

Do not ask, she said, just make it. N sound holes. Fender nobs the tall ones, that light up, light on the inside, pink on a toggle switch at the nobs- in silver, painted out headstock 3 inches wide by seven high, look if so, right to me also. It has hips, covers, and looks sexy a girl like me loves that also- other then it being kick ass. It was made in my pap shop. Do you see the wood in this thing oak from their tree or so the story goes? Rosewood fretboard, and several and bird and Lily inlays.

Look at the big photo like the picture of her on the back, the thing a has a fifties look- right? white pickguard- who does that? Cord jack on the said white piping, pink amp- with white stand- she even had an outfit to matches this thing. Look at her picks here four. And the white into pink and lavender fad case, with her face shot on it, like the guitar well you can see the show more- yet classy, as a pin-up on it.

'You crazy kids know how to spoil a girl.' I would know I am one of those kid girl teens.

~*~

Un- ah-

Oh-

Umm mm- it is good...

Kellie- The next morning while he- I was bathing, I and he admitted he overdid it last night. He said he was not sorry, but he had not been away from her that long before. Annie smiled and told him it felt good to have him all over her again, she missed it.

Remembering her coming home- 'Why do I buy cooking magazines in airports? I might as well be buying porn. I get all excited but there is nothing I can do about it.'

After having two orgasms back-to-back last night, I was surprised at how hard I was, and she has not gotten to the penis wash yet. As she bent down to wash his legs, her face got a helluva slap from that rock-hard penis. While washing his lower body and eye to eye with that rock-hard dick, she asked him if he wanted her right there and right now. Ray lifted her and asked if he could look at her beautiful heels. I knew he wanted her with her big legs behind her head and dried him off to give him, as always, what he wants.

I wasted no time... in going after what he requested. He started slowly, to enjoy every stroke. He hit it high, he hit it low. Now and then he floated with the only thing touching was his elbows. This gave him maximum penetration and gave Annie an early orgasm of the squirting kind. Her squirt- hit I squarely in his chest with her large ass up and bent back had her pussy facing forward.

I was now hitting a wet pussy that caused him to let loose his orgasm. Annie tried to pull him off to finish his orgasm off orally, but then again, he was slapping meat that could be heard all over the house. In the direction of the end of his orgasm... I just rotated her big hips deliberately, and hard against his penis, this caused him to moan. Since Annie was in a position that she could not pat her on back, she patted Ray. He was out of breath, and could not talk, nonetheless a little kiss, he gave I told her- job well done.

I laid there, plus watched me going in and out of sleep. When he reached up and touched her face, besides uttered the words she loves to hear.

(Moring at the café)

I pulled Ray is now out of bed, as well as into the bathroom to bathe him again, all being well this time they can make it through without some make out time. She was wrong, he just grabbed a hand full of her ass in a loving way.

'Hello, my- honey- my baby.' I smiled and asked if he wanted breakfast or brunch. I replied, 'Banquet!' Is it that late? I said it is only eight-thirty, but I did not know if you wanted to sleep some more or not.

He told her he will get up now but keep her alluring beautiful ass, away from him. I jumped on top of him and slapped his face with her ass. I cried out, 'Okay- I give up, sorry but I want you.'

Ray was sitting at the regular breakfast counter, her- I if he missed her. He told her every evening he had room, she comes to his room, so-o he could go to bed early to speed up time just so they could be together. He missed just

looking at her, feeling her close to him, stroking her butt, her breast, as well as, just hugging her tight in him, and her.

He missed her sleeping on top of him, although she does not do it as often as she used to. I saw this, besides, started to get up. I told him to sit there, she was just so touched by his words it made her cry. To break the ice- I said- 'it's a good thing I wasn't sitting at your breakfast counter- or I would be in trouble.' Annie said after what you just said, in trouble no, in my throat, yes. They both laughed as I placed their breakfast on the counter.

After breakfast, they both retired to the reading room. I with the morning paper, I with a book. He looked at her lying on the sofa with her ass sticking up like two basketballs and just thought about how much fun he is having with it. He saw him and knew what he was thinking. She grabbed a pillow and put it on top of her ass and asked if he wanted one that big. He said- if it is yours, yes, I do.

Cut-

Measures-

It is the complete, 100 percent wrong thing to do, and I stand up- for dinner feeling clean now, buoyant and pleased about everything- me, and the world too. Like the first time, I have felt- oh so healthy, after a long fever, plus doing what I need for me.

On the other hand, then again at dinner, my idiosyncrasy, as well as with it, the sick feeling, my uncertainties- return to me like before. I am not sure if I can barely follow the conversation at this point and time.

All I can think of is go...? Why? I do not feel right- I say... bizarrely.

Him- Do not go from me now?

Me- I must go...? Sorry...

Him- Do not go...?

At one point my uncle is telling a story- about one of his customers, and I notice everyone is laughing, so I laugh too with them, nevertheless a little too loud and long with there is, do you see I want to fit in. Do what as they do...

~*~

Part: 1

Marcel turns around, and to my surprise, his face is not cool, calm, or collected at all. It is the weird look, that I have learned- that he has when something is not right. His jaw is at work chomping, as well as his eyes are full of pain, and I can tell he hates himself... over this moment- like for being there, for being the one to say this, for being the one to show me... what on his mind. 'I'm sorry, Liv,' he says, I am below him the sign glowers in the darkness currently.

~*~

Humans, unregulated, can be cruel, and tricky; passionate and self-interested; unhappy and cantankerous. It is only after their make-up and basic emotions have been controlled, that they can be happy, lavish, and moral.

The Book of stuff-

I have the sudden dread of going any farther, at this phase in my life. That butterfly feeling in the deaths, or the pit of my stomach squeezing up, like a fist in the ovaries, making it hard to breathe, see, and deliberate. I cannot go on like this- I swear to you, I cannot. I do not want to know- anymore- what up or going down.

Marcel reaches out for me like he is thinking of touching me. Then remembering where we are and commanding his arms to his sides. 'Don't worry,' he says. He said- 'You have friends here.' She said back- 'It's probably not even something to worry about.'

My dialog is rising a little, and I am worried, concerned that I might have a breakdown like always. I lick my lips, trying to keep it all together. 'It was just a big mistake; I thought unsurely like always with me. We should not have come in the first place, another bad thought within me. I want to go home, ah- another thought to add to the shit heap!' I know I must sound like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but I cannot help it, you get it to do not you.

Run-

Running out- in the world that is death to me.

Walking through those double doors seems incredible.

'Liv, come on.... you must trust me.'

Then she does reach out, for just a second, skating one finger across my forearm. 'Okay? Trust me.' Did she say, along with you? 'I do trust you, it's just... um.' The air, the disgusting odor, the darkness, and the sensation of rot all

around me- so-much. It makes me want to run fast and not stop for anything or anyone.

‘If she is not here... well, that is not good. On the other hand, if she is... kind of there with me. I ponder- I think it might be even worse than I assumed.’

Marcel watches me closely for a second or more. ‘You have to know, Liv,’ he says finally, firmly, looks and gives, and he is right. I nod to the feelings of this... he gives me the barest glimmer white smile something in a movie, then reaches forward and heaves open the doors toward me or, so it is at that moment in my mind only.

We step into a vestibule openness, that looks exactly like what I imagine a cell in the Vaults might be like: The walls and floor are concrete, and whatever color they might once have been painted, now faded to a discolored, overgrown gray green. A single rhizome is set high in the ceiling and barely delivers enough light to illuminate the tiny space. There is a stool in the corner, occupied by a guard.

A place I do not get- my mind misplaced- lost in time- this guard is ordinary-sized- skinny and yet has some weight, even with a skin condition pockmarks and hair that reminds me of-of my pap, that I never met yet new in my mind.

He runs after me- I did not want him to- to see me like this... and all. As soon as Marcel and I stepped through the door, the guard made a small impulsive adjustment to his gun, drawing it closer toward his body; I thought I was going down; I was high- and swiveling the barrel ever so slightly in our direction. High not by choice she got me on the shit.

Marcel is beside me, not worried about my mental state. Suddenly, I feel very alert, in his hold.

‘Can’t be in here... they can be in my had.’

The guard says.

‘Restricted area’s- he knows I didn’t get it.’ For the first time since entering the Vaults, Marcel appears uncomfortable. The man- walks up, and fiddles nervously with his badge.

The guard gets to his feet and now mine also. The light is where I see it- amazingly, God may be showing me something... The man- he is not much taller

than I am- he is certainly shorter than Marcel. Then of all the guards I have seen today, he frightened me the most it pointed at my hand. Or am I in a dream?

There is something strange about his eyes yellow not brown to me, a flatness and hardness, which reminds me of a movie guy. I have never had a gun pointed at me before and staring into the long black tunnel of its barrel makes me feel the black blocking out the light like an eclipse like I am going to pass out.

‘Oh, he is here, all right. He is always here, nowadays.’ The guard smiles humorlessly, and his fingers tap on the trigger. I want it- when he speaks his lips curl upward, revealing a mouth full of crooked yellow teeth.

Part: 2

Kellie- ‘What do you know about Raymon?’

‘I thought Raymon would be here.’ The room takes on the stillness, and charge of the air outside, and reminds... of this boy.

~*~

Karly-

‘My heart is POUNDING.’ Me waiting for the thunder to crack. Marcel allows himself one small indication of nervousness: He curls and flexes his fingers against his thighs. I can almost see him thinking, trying to figure out what to say next. He must know that mentioning Raymon was a bad decision- even, I heard the contempt and suspicion in the guard’s voice as he pronounced the name.

After what seems like a long time-but is only a few seconds-the blanks, an official look sweeps down over his face again.

‘We heard there was problem, that’s all.’

The statement is sufficiently vague, and a decent assumption. Marcel twirls his security badge idly between two fingers. The guard flicks his eyes to it, and I can tell he relaxes.

~*~

Providentially, he does not try to look at it more closely. Marcel has only Level One security clearance in the labs, which means he barely has the right to visit the janitor’s closet, much less parade around delimited areas, there or anywhere else in Pitt, as though he owns them.

~*~

Hanna- 'Took you long enough,' the guard says flatly. 'Raymon has been out for months. All the better for CID, I guess. It is not the kind of thing we wanted to publicize.' The CID is the Controlled Information Department or if you are cynical like Hanna, the Corrupt Idiots-

Department or the Censorship Implementation Department, and goosebumps prick up on my arms. Something went very wrong in Ward Six if the CID got involved.

'You know how it is,' Marcel says. He has recovered from his temporary slip up; confidence and ease return to his voice.

'Impossible to get a straight answer from anyone over there.'

Another vague statement, but the guard just nods.

'You're telling me.' Then he shakes his head in my direction. 'Who's she?'

I can feel him staring at the unmarred skin on my neck, noticing that I have no procedural mark. Resembling many people, he unconsciously recoils- just a few inches, but enough so that the old feeling of humiliation, the feeling of being somehow wrong, creeps over me. I turn my eyes to the ground.

'She's a nonentity,' Marcel says, and even though I know he has to say it, it makes my chest ache dully. 'I am supposed to be showing her the Vaults, that is all. An educational process if you know what I mean.'

I hold my breath, certain that at any second, he will boot us out, almost wishing he would. Plus, yet... Just beyond the guard's stool is a single door made from heavy, thick metal, and protected by an electronic keypad. It reminds me of the bank vault at Central Savings downtown. Through it I can just make out distant sounds-human sounds, I think, though it is hard to tell. My mother could be beyond that door.

She could be in there, Marcel was right. I do have to know. For the first time, I began to know, fully, what Marcel told me last night: All this time, my mother might have been alive. While I was breathing; she was breathing too. While I was sleeping, she was sleeping elsewhere.

It is just like when I hold, release, and have the small one for the big O!

When I was awake thinking of her, she might have been thinking of me, too. It is overwhelming, both miraculous and fiercely tender. Marcel and the protector eye each other for a minute. Marcel continues spinning his badge around one finger, winding, and unwinding the chain. It puts the guard at ease.

freak! freak! freak! Shit- piss- my god, I as it comes out in that O!

‘I can’t let you back there,’ he says, but this time he sounds apologetic. He lowers his gun and sits down on the stool again. I exhale quickly; I have been holding my breath without meaning to. ‘You’re just doing your job,’ Marcel says, keeping his voice neutral. ‘So- you’re Raymon’s replacement?’

‘That’s right.’ The guard flicks his eyes to me and again I can feel his gaze lingering on my unmarked neck. I must stop myself from covering my skin with a hand. But then again, he must decide that we are not going to be trouble because he looks back to Marcel and says, ‘Marcel. Got reassigned from Three in February -after the incident.’ Something about the way he says incident sends chills up my spine. ‘Tough breaks, huh?’ Marcel leans up against a wall, the picture of casualness.

Only I can detect the edge in his voice. He is stalling. He does not know what to do from here, or how to get us inside. Marcel shrugs. ‘Quieter up here, that is for sure. Nobody in or out. At least, almost nobody.’

Part: 3

He smiles again, showing off those awful teeth, but his eyes maintain their strange flatness, as though there is a curtain drawn over them. I wonder if this, for him, was a side effect of the cure, or whether he was always like that. He tilts his head back, peering at Marcel through narrowed eyes, and his resemblance to a snake grows even stronger. ‘So- how’d you hear about Raymon?’

‘If I die unexpectedly can everyone just do the right thing, and pretend, I was a way better person than- I am?’

Marcel keeps up the unconcerned act, smiling, twirling the badge. ‘Rumors floating here and there,’ he says, shrugging. ‘You know how it is.’ ‘I know how it is,’ Marcel says. ‘But the CID was not too happy about it. Had us on lock for a few months. What exactly did you hear, anyway?’

‘When I am home alone, I eat tri-color pasta one color at a time.... and it feels great.’

Da ta da- like- a boy once said to me- 'If your fake orgasms as well as you do who you are, I am in trouble.'

I can tell you the question is an important one, a test. Be careful, I think in Marcel's direction, as though he might somehow hear me. Marcel hesitates for only a second before saying- 'Heard he might have sympathies on the other side.' Suddenly, it all makes sense: the fact that Marcel said- 'I have friends here,' the fact that he has had access to six in the past. One of the guards must have been a well-wisher, an active part of the resistance. Marcel's constant refrain plays in my head: There are more of us than you think.

Marcel decreases visibly. That was the right answer. He seems to decide that Marcel is trustworthy. We are in a tiny square, surrounded by the stained gray sides of the Vaults.

The grass here is amazingly lush, reaching to my knees. A single tree twists upward to our left, and a bird is twittering in its branches. It is surprisingly nice out here, peaceful, and pretty- strange to be standing in the middle of a little garden while enclosed by the massive stone walls of the prison, like being at the exact center of a hurricane, and finding peace and silence in the middle of so much shrieking damage.

Part: 4

Marcel has moved several paces away. He is standing, head bowed, with his eyes on the ground. He must have a sense too of the peacefulness here, the stillness that seems to hang in the air like a veil, covering the whole thing in softness, and rest. The sky above us is darker than it was when we first entered the Vaults: Against all the grayness and shadow, the grass stands intense and electric, as though it is lit up from inside. It will rain on any other, it just must. I have the sensation of the world holding its breath before a giant exhales, balancing, teetering, about to let go.

'Here...' Marcel's voice rings out, surprisingly loud, and it startles me.

'Right here.' He points to a shard of rock sticking up crookedly from the ground.

'That's where my father is.'

The grass is broken up by dozens of these rocks, which was naturally, haphazardly arranged. Then I realize that they have been deliberately tamped down into the earth. Some of them are covered in fading black markings, mostly

illegible, although on one stone I recognize the word BLAIR and on another DIED.

He- he- I love to get tickle right above my little shaft... and feel some fuzz.

Part: 5

By the time, I returned to the guest room where their lovemaking session had taken place, he sounds asleep. They have not seen each other in five days. It only took thirty minutes to go from hello to total exhaustion for Teddy who was sleeping like a baby. I did not want to, but she had to take a bath alone after Teddy left his calling card all over her legs, a little on her chin and breasts. She felt Teddy would not miss his feeling her up this one time. Looking in the bathroom mirror and only seeing herself without him with his hands all over her big ass, Annie saw a woman that had accomplished so much in a noticeably brief period. Yet with all she had accomplished, the greatest would-be capturing Ray. For without him, Annie knew she would not be the woman she is today.

My total concentration was on him. She wondered if this is what true love is. She knows he is her everything. She knows he loves her; He gave up his heartbreaker lifestyle and a year-long trip around the world with all expenses paid just to be with her. He had gotten the best at that time a virgin could give, although Annie gave way more than she had, he stayed. It had to be love and not lust.

Annie's only goal is to continually be the best at whatever he needed. Be it a cook or a warm mouth, she vowed to be always the best. On this day, she knew she was better, so much better.

Kellie- previous times - returned to the guest room and crawled up next to him. She always thought about how amazing it was that I could sleep in one spot without moving. She kissed his shoulder and stared at him as if she were seeing him for the first time. Going into the hostile territory was nothing compared to hunting him down. This gift that expanded her mind and body was released by him and she loves it increasingly each day. What this gift did was take a naive young virgin whose breasts had never been touched before and who would break a Popsicle in three pieces to downing he is seven-plus inches with the greatest on ease.

She never tried gymnastics before because she was too stiff, yet she can keep her legs behind her head for as long as it takes, I complete his mission. Annie opens the curtains and looks toward the Heavens to give thanks for selecting Teddy for her. Then she rolled teddy on his back and put his arm around her, kissed the head of his penis, and went to sleep a happy little girlie.

I realize as the purpose of the courtyard dawns on me. We are standing in the middle of a graveyard. Marcel is staring down at a large chunk of concrete, as flat as a tablet, pressed down into the earth in front of his feet.

All the writing is visible here, the words neatly printed in what looks like a black marker, their edges slightly blurred as though someone has been continuously retracing them over an extended period. It says rest in peace.

I say... I want to reach out and slip my hand into Marcel's, but I do not think we are safe. A few windows are surrounding the courtyard on the ground floor, and even though they are thickly coated in grime, someone could walk by at any moment, lookout, and see us. 'Your father?'

Marcel nods, then shakes his shoulders, a sudden movement as though trying to jerk himself away from sleep. 'Yeah.'

'He was here?'

One side of Marcel's mouth quirks up into a smile, but the rest of his face remains stony. 'For fourteen years.' He draws a slow circle in the dirt with his toe, the first physical sign of discomfort or distraction he has given since we arrived. At that moment I am in awe of him: Since I have known him, he has done nothing but support me and give me comfort and listen to me, and all this time he has been carrying the weight of his secrets too.

~*~

I say to you now dad- 'What happened...?' I ask quietly. 'I mean, what did he...?' I trail off. I do not want to push the issue. It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe you never loved me, It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe, You never loved me, You can't hurt me now, I got away from you, I never thought I would, you can't make me cry, you once had the power, I never felt so-o good about myself, seems like yesterday, I lay down next to your boots and I prayed for your anger to end, Oh Father I have sinned; Oh Father you never wanted to live that way you never wanted to hurt me, why am I

running away, maybe someday, when I look back I'll be able to say, you didn't mean to be cruel Somebody hurt you too.

~*~

Marcel glances at me quickly and looks away. 'What did he do?' He speaks.

The hardness has returned to his voice. 'I- do not know. What all the people who end up in Ward Six do. He thought to himself. Stood up for what he believed in.'

Refused to give in...'

'Ward Six?'

Marcel avoids my eyes carefully. 'The dead ward,' he says quietly. 'For political prisoners, mostly. They are kept in solitary confinement. Besides, no one ever gets released.'

He gestures around him, to the other shards of stone poking up through the grass, dozens of makeshift graves. 'Ever,' he repeats, and I think of the sign on the door: LIFERS, HA- HA.

'I'm so sorry, Marcel.' I would give anything to touch him, but the best I can do is an inch closer to him so that our skin is separated by only a few inches.

He looks at me then, shooting me a sad smile. 'He and my mom were only sixteen when they met. Can you believe that? She was only eighteen when she had me.'

Part: 6

He drops into a squat and traces his father's name with his thumb. I suddenly understand that the reason he comes here so often is to continue darkening the letters as they fade, to keep some record of his father. I think for my mom it was easier to believe he had died. She did not want to think of him rotting in this place.'

'They wanted to run away together, but he was caught before they could finalize a plan. I never knew he had been taken into custody.'

I just thought he was dead. My mom thought it would be better for me, and nobody in the Wilds knew enough to correct her.

I feel sick. The walls are pressing closer to us, growing taller and narrower, too- so the sky feels increasingly remote, an ever-diminishing point. We will never get out, I think, and then take a deep breath, trying to stay calm.

He continues looping a finger over the letters, back and forth. 'My aunt and uncle told me the truth when I turned fifteen. They wanted me to know. I came here to meet him, but-'

I see- Marcel shudder, a sudden stiffening movement of his shoulders and back.

'Anyway, it was too late. He was dead, had been dead for a few months, and buried here, where his remains would not contaminate anything.'

Marcel straightens up. 'Ready?' he asked me, for the second time this morning. I nod, even though I am not sure that I am. He allows himself the brief flicker of a smile, and I see, for a second, a bit of warmth spark up in his eyes. Then he is all business again.

I take one last look at the tombstone before we go in. I try to think of prayer or something appropriate to say, but nothing comes to me. The lessons of the scientists are not clear about what happens when you die: You dissipate into the heavenly matter that is God, and get absorbed by him, although they also tell us that the cured go to heaven and live forever in perfect harmony and order.

'Your name.' I spin around to face Marcel. He had already moved past me, headed back for the door. 'Marcel.'

~*~

He gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head. 'Assigned to me,' he says. For a moment Marcel's hand pauses on the gun, his fingers once again dancing the trigger. 'Sure,' he says, keeping his eyes on

Marcel, as though I am not even there. 'You must have heard about it.'

Marcel shrugs. 'A little of this, a little of that. Nothing confirmed.' Marcel laughs. It is a terrible sound. It reminds me of the time I saw two seagulls fighting in midair over a scrap of food, screeching as they tumbled toward the ocean. 'Oh, it's confirmed,' he says.

'Happened back in February.'

We got the alarm from Raymon. 'Course if he was in on it, she might have had a lead time of six, seven hours.'

Part: 7

17th November- 2014-

'The '50 Shades of Grey' man looks just like 'Love Actually' kid...? I feel less ~turned on~ and more like... I should call child services...'

Kalliez14@twtter.com 

Kelliez14@twtter.com < look at that shit there... I can have anything can I?

Cupcakes- 'If the frosting has cream cheese it counts as breakfast, right?'

Through the walls, we can hear low moaning, a constant vibration. It is worse, somehow, than the screeches, and screams of earlier: This is the sound people make when they have long ago given up hope that anyone is listening, a reflexive sound, meant just to fill the time and space and the darkness.

'Cooking for one suck, because no matter how I portion it; I seem to end up wasting food. Also, loneliness...'

I am going to be sick. If Marcel is correct, my mother is here, behind one of these terrible doors-so close that if I could rearrange the particles and make the stone melt away, I might put my hand out, and touch her. Closer than I ever thought I would be to her again.

As we walk, I can hear the barrel of his gun slapping against his thigh. I am worried I might faint, and I want to reach out, and steady myself against the walls, but they are coated with fungus and moisture. On either side of us, bolted metal cell doors appear at intervals, each outfitted with a single grimy window the size of a dinner plate.

'Being told 'I know you can do this' weirdly makes me not want to try...

'You CAN'T do this' has the same effect. Okay, yes, I might just be lazy.'

I am filled with competing thoughts and desires: My mother cannot be here; I would rather she was dead; I want to see her alive. And filled, too, with that other word, pressing itself underneath all my other thoughts: leakage, seepage, escape. A possibility too fantastic to contemplate. If my mother had

been the one to break out, I would have known. She would have come for me. Ward Six consists of just one long hallway.

‘Here’s your boy Raymon if you want to say hello.’ Then he laughs again, that awful crackling sound. I think about what he said when we first entered the vestibule: He is always here, nowadays.

Ahead of us, Marcel does not respond, but I see him shudder. Marcel nudges me sharply in the back with the barrel of his gun. ‘So, what do you think?’

As far as I can tell, there are about forty doors, forty separate cells.

‘This is it...’

Marcel says. ‘The grand tour.’ He pounds on one of the very first doors.

~*~

Random- like- ‘I get the same feeling at the dentist that I get when a cop car is behind me; I haven’t done anything wrong, but I feel incredibly guilty.’

When he says the word, the walls seem to collapse around me. I take a quick step backward, bumping up against a wall. It could be her, I think, and for one horrible, guilty second, I am disappointed. Then I remind myself that she might not be here at all and in any case, it could have been anyone who escaped, any female sympathizer or agitator.

Still, the dizziness does not subside. I am filled with anxiety and fear and a desperate craving, all at once.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Marcel asks. His voice sounds distant.

‘Air,’ I manage to force out. ‘It’s the air in here.’

Hate is not the most dangerous thing, he had said. Indifference is.

Marcel starts talking. His voice is low and still casual, but there is an undertone of force to it: the vocal sound street peddlers lapse into when they are trying to get you to buy a carton of bruised berries or a broken toy. It is okay, I will give you a deal, no problem, trust me.

‘Listen, just let us in for a minute. That is all it will take: a minute. Marcel laughs again, that unpleasant crackling sound. ‘You think it’s bad out here,’ he says. ‘It’s paradise compared to the cells.’ He takes pleasure in this, and it reminds me of a debate I had a few weeks ago with Marcel when he was

arguing against the usefulness of the cure. I said- that without love, there could also be no hate: without hate, no violence. You can tell she is already scared out of her thoughts. I had to come out of here for this, a day off and everything, I was going to go to the pier, try out some fishing.

The point is if I bring her home and she is not straightened out - well, you know, chances are I will just have to haul out here again. And I only have a couple of days off, and summer is almost over-'

'Why all the trouble?' Marcel says, jerking his head in my direction.

'If she's causing problems, there's an easy to fix her up.' It is a bold lie. Marcel could easily ask to see my ID card, and then Marcel and I are screwed. I am not sure what the punishment would be for infiltrating the Vaults under pretenses, but it cannot be good. Marcel smiles tightly. 'Her father's Steven, a commissioner at the labs.

He does not want to do an early procedure, no trouble, no violence, or mess. Looks bad, you know.'

~*~

Marcel appears interested in me for the first time. He looks me up and down like I am a grapefruit he is evaluating in the supermarket for mellowness, and for a moment he does not say anything.

Then, finally, he stands, slipping the gun onto his shoulder. 'Come on,' he says. 'Seven minutes.'

'Let us go,' he says, manufacture his vocal sound crotchety, like my little fit has left him impatient. Nevertheless, his touch is gentle, and his hands warm and reassuring. As he is fiddling with the keypad, which requires both that he type code, and scan his hand on fingerprint- matching screen, Marcel reaches out and takes my elbow.

Part: 8

Ray's idea of bathing her is to wash her ass and feel her up repeatedly. But one thing is for sure, he cleans her as well. After bathing herself Annie sat on the bed and reflected on today's events. It was two forty-five and she flew out of Pitt. At nine this morning. She became Less than this nice naive barely boob-ed adult, unassuming, sexless woman. Now she is a killing sex machine on me. How could the taste of he come do this to her?

And she did...

I wish he... could keep it there, but after only a second, he lets me go again. I can read a plea, loud and clear, in his eyes: Be strong. We are there. Be strong for just a little while longer. The locks on the door release with a click.

Marcel goes first, then me, then Marcel.

Marcel leans his shoulder against it, straining, and it slides open just enough for us to squeeze by into the hallway beyond.

But the smell is what hits me: a horrible, rotting, festering stink, like the Dumpsters by the harbor, the place where all the fish intestines get discarded, on the hottest day. The passage is so narrow we must go single file, and it is even darker than the rest of the Vaults.

~*~

I stood looking out at the cattle as it grazed in the far-field. It was good to be home, but he could not get his head on straight. That is when he saw the lone horse out in the field. Anger surged in him as he urged his horse into a run across the large expanse of pasture. If one of those longhorn cattle came near enough to gore that Stallion, they would be out a lot of money. His mind kept going over who oversaw the horses this morning when he headed out. Then he remembered, it was Maggie. Shaking his head as he easily jumped the fence and gained on the skittish Stallion. The horse realized he was in the wrong place. Once- he neared the horse he saw the dangling rope. Grinding his teeth and jumping off his horse he grabbed the rope and reached up to tie it to the horn on his saddle. He stepped up into the saddle and started for the barn. He would have her hide for this. She knew how to tie a proper knot. Where was that girl's mind?

When he neared the barn, he saw his little sister brushing her mare. She looked up and their eyes locked. Hers was the first to dart away. She knew instantly that he was angry. The horse he was leaning toward her was one of the prize Stallions that her father had paid a lot of money for. Stepping around the back of her horse, she gazed over the horse's back timidly, dreading his wrath. Maybe if she put the horse between them, it would be better, but the anger in his eyes was growing. Finally, she walked out of the stall and reached up for the rope that he handed her.

'Maggie...'

‘What were you thinking? Do you have any idea where this horse was when I found him?’ Not giving her time to respond, he continued with a loud, booming voice full of anger. ‘He was out in the pasture with the longhorn cattle. What if one of those bulls decided to tear open this Stallion? How would he get loose? You know how to tie a knot.’ He slowly dismounted his horse and stood in front of his sister. Grabbing the rope, he tied it in a proper knot and slipped it over the hook on the side of the stall.

‘I am sorry Ridge. I do not know how he got loose. I swear I got married tightly.’ She edged away from him as he continued to stare at her.

He reached up and pulled his cowboy hat off to wipe the sweat from his forehead. How could he stay mad at her? With a quick motion, he grabbed her and pulled her into his embrace. ‘Just be glad it was me that found him and not dad. He would have you clean out stalls with your hands.’ He reached up and pulled her ponytail.

She made a face just thinking about that punishment. ‘Thanks, Ridge, for not ratting on me this time but I will do better. I was distracted by the new horse and all.’ Looking over her shoulder at her new mare she smiled. ‘But you’ve got to admit she’s worth the distraction.’

He laughed and pushed her gently back toward her mare. ‘Well, distraction or not, don’t let it happen again or I’ll have you using your toothbrush on the bits.’

As she giggled, he rolled his eyes and headed over to brush his horse down, his heart-melting slightly at the sound of her giggle. That was one of the many things he had missed while in Iraq.

His mind went back to that bad place that haunted his dreams and woke him in a cold sweat every night. The sand ate into his feet as he stood with his back against the jeep. He held his gun against his body in complete silence, waiting for the enemy to move closer. The cries from his injured fellow soldiers filled the air, causing his heart to pound loudly in his ears.

Suddenly-

A loud explosion rattled the air and then the next thing he knew was seeing the hospital room ceiling. Then he was brought back to the stable when he felt a slight shiver run up his spine. Turning he realized a female was in the stables that he did not know.

Maggie was talking with her as he walked up. The woman was stunning in her jeans and t-shirt, as she stood talking about the new mare. Both women looked up when he stopped beside Maggie.

'Ridge, have you met the new vet yet?' she asked in a sweet voice. He looked down at her with a warning in his eyes, letting her know he was aware of the slight hint in her voice.

The woman stepped forward and extended her hand. 'I am glad to finally meet the town's hero, Ridge Cauthen. Thank you for all you have done for this country.' She said in an exhale as she took in his gorgeous face and lean, muscular body.

He took her hand sheepishly as he grinned down at her. 'I'm just a normal man doing what he had to do.'

Suddenly- embarrassed, she said, 'I'm sorry, I didn't say my name, it's Mallory Talon.'

'Good to meet you, Mallory.' He tipped his hat and spun on his booted heel, heading back out of the stable. One thing he had learned while at war was when that tingle went down your spine, you needed to take cover and it was time to take cover.

It was raining we ran to the barn and had hot sex and kissing. I was up early kidding him, and she did not want to drain him before his golf game with Timmy.

She brought him to the brink but did not drain his tank the way he put it. It was eight o'clock and as he was preparing to meet Timmy for their nine o'clock tee time, I was still kidding him about what he misses when he plays golf. She told him to shoot that little white ball in that hole because you did not shoot anything in this hole.

He laughed and said I can still cancel. I said do not do that, that golf course may close, but I stay open. She kissed him passionately, grabbed his adulthood, and told him to go beat Timmy and if he won, she would give him a trophy. He waved bye and shouted, "I have had a trophy since I met you." Annie kissed him and said that is good because I am going to drain you right now.

~*~

Even Marcel curses and coughs, covering his nose with his hand.

Behind me, I can imagine Marcel grinning. 'Ward Six has its dancing special perfume,' he says.

It is all good! Remember that!

'Your real name is Marcel,' I say, and he nods. This is what people are always talking about when they talk about God: this feeling, of being held and unspoken and protected. Feeling this way seems about as close to saying a prayer as you could get, so I follow Marcel back inside, holding my breath as we again encounter that awful stink. He has a secret name, just like me. We stand there for one more moment, looking at each other, and in that instant, I feel our connection so strongly it is as though it achieves physical existence, becomes a hand all around us, cupping us together, protecting us.

I follow Marcel down a series of serpentine hallways. The sensation of stillness and peace I had in the courtyard is replaced almost immediately by fear so sharp it is like a blade going straight into the core of me, driving down and deep until I can hardly breathe or keep going. At points, the wailing grows louder, to a fever pitch, and I must cover my ears; then it ebbs away again. Once we pass a man wearing a long white lab coat, stained with what looks like blood; he is leading a patient on a leash.

Neither one looks at us as we pass. We make so many twists and turns I am beginning to wonder if Marcel is lost, especially as the hallways grow dirtier, and the lights above us become fewer in number so that eventually we are walking through murk and obscurity, with a single functioning bulb to light up twenty feet of the blackened stone corridor. At intervals various glowing neon signs appear in the darkness, as though they are rising out of the air itself: WARD ONE, WARD TWO, WARD THREE, WARD FOUR. Marcel keeps going, though, and when we pass the hallway that leads to Ward Five, I call out to him, convinced he has gotten confused or lost his way.

Part: 9

'Marcel,' I say, but even as I say the word it strangles me because just then we come up to a heavy set of double doors marked with a small sign, barely illuminated, so faint I can hardly read it. And yet it seems to burn as brightly as a thousand suns.

He strokes the barrel of his gun-which has been resting casually between his knees- as though it is a pet.

'That is right.

This is the first time I have heard anyone in an official capacity acknowledge the existence of the people in the Wilds, and I sucked in a sharp breath. I know it must be painful for Marcel to stand there, talking dismissively about a friend who has been caught for being a sympathizer. The punishment must have been swift and severe, especially since he was on the government payroll. He was hanged, shot, or electrocuted or thrown into one of the cells to rot- if the courts were merciful and decided against a verdict of death by torture. If he even had a trial. It came as a total shock to me. 'Course I hardly knew him- saw him sometimes in the break room, once or twice in the shitter, that is about it.

Kept to himself, mostly. It makes sense. Must have been getting chatty with the Invalids.'

Amazingly, Marcel's voice does not falter. 'What was the tip-off?' Marcel keeps massaging his gun, and something about the motion-gentle, like he is willing it to live- makes me feel sick. 'No tip-off, exactly.' He sweeps his hair off his face, revealing a splotchy red forehead, shiny with sweat. It is much hotter here than it was in other wards. The air must get trapped in these walls, rotting, and festering like everything else in this place. 'It figures he must have known something about the escape. He oversaw cell inspections. And the tunnel did not just sprout up overnight.'

'The escape?' The words fly out of my mouth before I can help it. My heart starts jolting painfully in my chest.

Nobody has ever escaped the Crypts, not ever.

'You must have heard about it.'

Marcel shrugs. 'A little of this, a little of that. Nothing confirmed.'

Marcel laughs. It is a terrible sound. It reminds me of the time I saw two seagulls fighting in midair over a scrap of food, screeching as they tumbled toward the ocean. 'Oh, it's confirmed,' For a moment Marcel's hand pauses on the gun, his fingers once again dancing the trigger.

'Sure,' he says, keeping his eyes on Marcel, as though I am not even there. He speaks. 'Happened back in February. We got the alarm from Raymon. 'Course if he was in on it, she might have had a lead time of six, seven hours.'

When he says the word, the walls seem to collapse around me. Then I remind myself that she might not be here at all and in any case, it could have been anyone who escaped, any female sympathizer or agitator. Still, the dizziness does not subside. I take a quick step backward, bumping up against a wall. It could be her, I think, and for one horrible, guilty second, I am disappointed.

~*~

Then- I only have a couple of days off, and summer is almost over-.'

It is okay, I will give you a deal, no problem, trust me.

'Listen, just let us in for a minute. That is all it will take: a minute. You can tell she is already scared out of her mind. I had to come out of here for this, a day off and everything, I was going to go to the pier, try out some fishing.

The point is if I bring her home and she is not straightened out - well, you know, chances are I will just have to haul out here again.

I am filled with anxiety and fear and a desperate craving, all at once.

'What's wrong with her?' Marcel asks.

His voice sounds distant.

'Air,' I manage to force out. 'It's the air in here.'

Marcel laughs again, that unpleasant crackling sound. 'You think it's bad out here,' he says. 'It's paradise compared to the cells.' He takes pleasure in this, and it prompts me of a debate I had a few weeks ago with Marcel when he was arguing against the usefulness of the cure. I said that without love, there could also be no hate: without hate, no violence. Hate is not the most dangerous thing, he had said. Indifference is.

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'Her father's Steven, a commissioner at the labs.

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It is a bold lie. Marcel could easily ask to see my ID card, and then Marcel and I are screwed. I am not sure what the punishment would be for infiltrating the Vaults under pretenses, but it cannot be good.

Behind me, I can imagine Marcel grinning. 'Ward Six has its special perfume,' he says- As we walk, I can hear the barrel of his gun, slapping against his thigh. I am worried I might faint, and I want to reach out and steady myself against the walls, but they are coated with fungus and moisture. On either side of us, bolted metal cell doors appear at intervals, each outfitted with a single grimy window the size of a dinner plate.

Through the walls, we can hear low moaning, a constant vibration. It is worse, somehow, than the screeches, and screams of earlier: This is the sound people make when they have long ago given up hope that anyone is listening, a reflexive sound, meant just to fill the time and space and the dimness.

I am going to be sick.

Then filled, too, with that other word, pressing itself beneath all my other thoughts: escape, leakage, escape. An occasion too fantastic to contemplate. If my mother had been the one to break out, I would have known.

She would have come for me.

If Marcel is correct, my mother is here, behind one of these terrible doors-so close that if I could rearrange the particles and make the stone melt away, I might put my hand out and touch her. Closer than I ever thought I would be to her again.

I am filled with competing thoughts and desires: My mother cannot be here; I would rather she was dead; I want to see her alive. Ward Six consists of just one long hallway. As far as I can tell, there are about forty doors, forty separate cells.

'This is it,' Marcel says. 'The grand tour.' He pounds on one of the very first doors. 'Here's your boy Raymon if you want to say hello.' Then he laughs again, that awful crackling sound.

I think about what he said when we first entered the vestibule: He is always here, nowadays. Ahead of us, Marcel does not respond, but I see him shudder.

Marcel nudges me sharply in the back with the barrel of his gun. 'So, what do you think?'

'Awful,' I croak out. My throat feels like it has been encircled with barbed wire. Marcel seems pleased. 'Better to listen and do as you're tell,' he says.

'No use ending up like this guy.'

We paused in front of one of the cells. Marcel nods toward the tiny window, and I take a hesitant step forward, pressing my face up against the glass. It is so grimy it is opaque, but if I squint, I can just make out a few shapes in the obscurity of the cell: a single bed with a flimsy, dirty mattress; a toilet; a bucket that looks like it might be the human equivalent of a dog's water bowl. At first, there is a pile of old rags in the corner too, until- I realize that this thing is the 'guy' Marcel was pointing out: a filthy, crouching heap of skin and bones and crazy, tangled hair. He is motionless, and his skin is so dirty it blends in with the gray of the stone walls behind him. If it were not for his eyes, rolling continuously back and forth as though he is checking the air for insects, you would never know he was alive. You would never even know he was human. The thought flashes again: I would rather she be dead. Not in this place.

Anywhere but here.

'What?' I speak.

For a moment he does not answer. He is staring at something; I cannot see some door farther down the hall.

Marcel continued down the hall, and I heard him draw in his breath sharply. I look up. He is standing perfectly still, and the appearance on his face makes me afraid.

Then he turns to me abruptly, a quick, convulsive shake.

'Don't,' he says, his voice a croak, and the fear surges, overwhelms me.

'What is it?' I ask you again. I start down the hall toward him. It seems, suddenly, that he is extremely far away, and when Marcel speaks up behind me, his voice too sounds distant.

‘That’s where she was,’ he is saying. ‘Number one-eighteen. Admin has not coughed up the dough to get the walls patched, yet, so, for now, we are just leaving it as is. Not a lot of money around here for improvements-’

Marcel is watching me. All his control and confidence had vanished.

Marcel holds up his hand like he is thinking of blocking my progress. Our eyes meet for just a second and something flashes between us- a warning, or an apology and then I am pushing beyond him into cell 117.

His eyes are blazing with anger, or pain; his mouth is twisted into a grimace. My head feels full of noise.

In every way it is identical to the cells I have glimpsed through the tiny hallway windows: a rough cement floor; a rust-stained toilet, and a bucket full of water, in which several cockroaches are revolving slowly; a tiny iron bed with a paper-thin mattress, which someone has dragged into the very center of the room.

But the walls.

‘Stray bobby pins; you are my Everest.’

#- Hashtag- (Organizing Day)

Looped huge and scratched, just barely, in the corners; inscribed in the graceful script and solid block lettering; chipped, scratched, picked away, as though the walls are slowly melting into poetry.

And on the ground, lying curled up against one wall is a dull silver chain with a charm still attached to it: a ruby-encrusted dagger whose blade has been worn down to a small nub.

The walls are covered- crammed- with writing. Nope- Not writing. They are covered with a single four-letter word that has been inscribed over and over on every available surface.

Love.

Part: 10

Sleepy- sleepy- sleepy- ‘How long can you stay still before you develop bedsores?’ Lazy boy...!

#- Hashtag: (MotivationMonday)

DADDY- My father's charm. My mother's necklace. My mother. All this time, during every long second of my life when I believed her dead, she was here: scratching, burrowing, chipping away, encased in the stone walls like a long-buried secret.

You know- 'For someone with such an intense need to be liked you-you would think I would have figured out how to be less of an asshole.'

I feel, suddenly, as though I am back in my dream, standing on a cliff as the solid ground disintegrates underneath me, transforms into the sand in an hourglass, running away under my feet. I feel the way I do at that moment when I realize that all the ground has vanished, and I am standing on a bare blade of air, ready to drop.

'It is terrible, you, see? Look at what the disease did to her. Who knows how many hours she spent scrabbling along these walls like a rat?'

Tv time- 'Does the food network use music recycled from 80's porn, or do I want to freak that soufflé?' Therefore, I do eat- God- shit and piss! 'I suspect that low-carb diets work not because they are healthier, but because without carbs I simply lose the will to eat.'

~*~

Marcel and Marcel are standing behind me. Marcel's words are muffled by a layer of cloth. I take a step forward into the cell, suddenly fixated on a shaft of light, extending like a long golden finger from a space in the wall that has been chipped clear away.

The clouds must have begun to break apart outside: Through the hole, on the other side of the stone fortress, I see the flashing blue of the 3 Rivers, and leaves shifting and tumbling over one another, a snow slip of green and sun and the perfume of wild, growing things. The Boondocks...

As he is fiddling with the keypad, which requires both that he type code and scan his hand on fingerprint-matching screen, Marcel reaches out and takes my elbow. 'Let us go,' he says, making his voice gruff like my little fit has left him impatient.

Nevertheless, his touch is moderate, and his hands warm and reassuring. I wish he could keep it there, but after only a second, he lets me go again. I can read a plea, loud and clear, in his eyes: Be strong.

We are there. Be strong for just a little while longer. Marcel appears interested in me for the first time.

He looks me up and down like I am a grapefruit he is evaluating in the supermarket for ripeness, and for a moment he does not say anything. Then, finally, he stands, slipping the gun onto his shoulder. 'Come on,' he says. 'Five minutes.' The locks on the door release with a click. Marcel leans his shoulder against it, straining, and it slides open just enough for us to squeeze by into the hallway beyond.

Marcel goes first, then me, then Marcel. The passage is so narrow we must go single file, and it is even darker than the rest of the Vaults.

But the smell is what hits me: a horrible, rotting, festering stink, like the Dumpsters by the harbor, the place where all the fish intestines get discarded, on the hottest day. Even Marcel curses and coughs, covering his nose with his hand.

So many hours, so many days, looping those same four letters over and over: that strange and terrifying word, the word that confined her here for over ten years.

~*~

In addition to the word that helped her escape. In the lower half of one wall, she has traced the word so many times in such enormous script- LOVE, each letter the size of a child- and gouged so deeply into the stone that the oh has formed a tunnel, and she has gotten out. Food for the body, milk for your bones, ice for the bleeding, a belly of stones.

-A folklore consecration...

Even after the iron gates clang shut behind us and the Vaults recedes in the distance, the feeling of being penned in on all sides does not go away. There is still a terrible, squeezing pressure in my chest, and I must struggle to suck in full breaths.

An ancient prison bus with a wheezing motor carries us away from the border to Deering. From there Marcel and I walk back toward the center of Pittsburgh, staying on opposite sides of the sidewalk. Every couple of feet he swivels his head to look at me, opening, and closing his mouth, like he is pronouncing a series of inaudible words. I know he is worried about me, and waiting for me to break down, but I cannot bring myself to meet his eyes or

speak to him. I keep my eyes locked straight ahead of me, keep my feet cycling forward. Other than the terrible pain in my chest and stomach, my body feels numb.

I cannot feel the ground underneath me or the wind zipping through the trees, skating past my face; cannot feel the warmth of the sun, which has, against all odds, broken through the terrible black clouds, lighting the world up a strange greenish color, as though everything is submerged in water.

When I was little and my mother died -when I thought she had died- I remember going out for my first-ever run and getting hopelessly lost at the end of Congress, a street I had been playing on my whole life. I turned a corner and found myself in front of the Bubble and Soap Cleaners and was suddenly unable to remember where I was, and whether the home was to the left or the right.

Nothing looked the same.

Everything looked like a painted replica of itself, fragile and distorted, like I was caught in a funhouse hall of mirrors, with a face does not mine looking back at me, luminous my regular world back to me, I feel now, once again; yes-lost, found, and lost again, all at once this was happening or so it seems to me, I wonder if it was to them. Also- now I know somewhere in this world, in the wildness on the other side of the fence, my mother is alive and breathing I see her angel body in- front of me all the time, do you see her? Me- sweating, moving, and thinking frantically. I spectacle if she is thinking about me... plus the pain shoots deeper, in my mind, and hurting young small body it makes me- lose my breath completely, that I did not know I was holding in, so I must rest... you see me sitting done in the grass, then I got up started walking and double up, one hand on my stomach.

Still- there are people on the streets, that I and you can see. This including a man that I take for a watchdog right away. Even now just before noon, he has a bullhorn swinging from his neck, besides a wooden baton strapped to one thigh.

I must fight my way through the pain that I have that they gave to me. It is radiating through my whole body, like heartburn in the night after eating far too much. Now, throbbing up into my head and shank with tremors down to my legs and toes. 'I think so,' I make a harsh gasp out...!

~*~

‘Backstreet- on your left- go...’ I uncurl up as much as I can- an adequate amount of, at least, to hobble into the backstreet in the middle of two larger buildings that a black glass and like way far up there, one has a point on it.

Halfway down the back street there are a few metal dumpsters, arranged parallel to one another, bustling with flies. The smell is disgusting, like being back in the Vaults, on the other hand, I sink between them anyway, appreciative for the concealment and the chance to be seated. As soon as I am resting, the throbbing hits and ticks in my head subside some, yet not all. I slope my head back against the brick wall there, and feel the world swaying some to my eyes, and looking forward and to the sides, a ship cut loosens for now mooring.

Marcel- he must have seen him too... there... do you? He stays a couple of feet away from me, skims through the street, trying to appear undisturbed, or unworried. Then again, he murmurs in my direction, ‘Can you move- Jezz?’ The voices said.

Part: 11

Marcel joins me a few moments later, squatting in front of me, brushing the hair away from my face. It is the first time he has been able to touch me all day. ‘I’m sorry, Liv,’ he says, and I know he means it when he said something like this. ‘I thought you’d want to know.’ Not...?

Ray aka Raymond...

~*~

She- I see her face too-

‘Twelve years,’ I say basically and so simply. ‘I thought she was dead for twelve years.’ For a while, we stayed there in stillness. I am lost now in the past... confused me too.

~*~

Marcel rubs circles on my shoulders and arms then lay me down and feel my knees- anywhere he can reach a like sound hole he is despairing to maintain bodily contact with me. I wish I could close my eyes, and be blown into dust, and have nothing but nothingness, not feeling all my thoughts run like a train running down an upcoming dead-end track. I understand something clearly at last run-in flickers like being in the car looking out the window all the same as the girl in the first story.

Diffuse like fuzz or bully lint of mine- like just drifting off on the wind. All the same, his hands keep pulling me back, yes back- into the backstreet, dark cold and damp, it is freaking Pittsburgh, what do you expect, and a world that has suddenly stopped making sense will not be right. She is out there somewhere, breathing, thirsty, eating, walking, swimming. Impossible like how and now, to contemplate going on with my life... It is just freaking impossible to imagine sleeping and lacing up my shoes for a run and helping.

~*~

(Home)

I see- my new mom so bitches 2, and she is loading up all the dishes, and even lying in the house with some new boyfriend, when I know that she exists on in his mind as freaking perfect: that she is out there, orbiting as far from me as a distant constellation, like stars in the milky ways is not far enough.

Why?

Tell me why I did not just walk- yet she comes for me?

'Your mother loved you.

She loved her dicks more.

Do you recognize that? She loved you.

Sure... I thought to myself. She still loves you. She desired you to be not hurtful.'

Yet you want to be that way to her.

On the other hand- then again- I do not know whom to pray to.

All at once, I cannot remember any words said to me, and I cannot think of anything but being in the church not want to be there; like- when I was little and watching, I recall the sun brightness up my day, and then fade away beyond the stained- glass windows, loved it- like just watching all that light die, like my faith hope- see if it would come back- ha. What do you think I have?

I have truly nothing, but dull panes of colored glass, raying out for me. All metallic thin and not- dunce insubstantial- looking. The thought flashes as speedily and clearly as an electrical surge passing like my clit in the light night, bringing the pain searing back. I squeezed my eyes shut, drop my head forward,

pray for it to pass, and give the finger to the father, and walk out, I know he freaked Jenny and not in the ass.

Watching it tumble to the ground, it reminds me of my mother 1, and those strange and terrifying walls and the tears come faster back then. I swore to the man up there I would never cry for anyone like that ever- never.

It is too late, I feel dicked in the ass once more, and it gets old and sore. Tears are blurring my vision, I kick a small boy in the face, dumping holy water in a teen girl's eyes, that was pointing at me saying shit that I did with a girl. I turn away from him and start fragmenting lines at the wall and running a fingernail down the bench. Over her name... she was my friend, not a lover. A minuscule portion of brick crumbles away.

The girl- Hanna- 'If you cared about me, you would take me away,' I say. 'If you cared about me at all you would go right now.'

His place I go-

'I do care about you,' Ray says. 'You don't.' Now I know I am being juvenile, but I cannot help it. 'She did not either... she did not care at all. Like bitch 1, all the same.'

'That's not true.' He yelled out- running after. I said- 'Why didn't she come for me, then?' I am still turning away from him, pressing the palm against his room wall, hard; feeling like it, too, might collapse at any second.

(My thoughts)

'Where is she now? freaking shit- I should like my sister, yet that is what, and everyone wants, isn't it? she said moody and pissed off at the world.

Why didn't she come looking for me then is she the one?'

Ray said- You know why, he says, more firmly.

'You know what would have happened if she was caught again- if she was caught with you. It would have meant death for both of you.'

I know he is right, but that does not make it any better. I keep going stubbornly, unable to stop myself from the shit I feel. 'It is not that... it is not that- she does not care, and you do not care. Nobody ever cares... About me- about- shit and about- anything or anyone.' I draw my forearm across my face moving into the handhold of my cheeks, swiping at my nose getting the snot.

~*~

Ray puts a hand on each of my elbows and guides me around to face him. When I refuse to meet his eyes yet feel dejected, he tilts my chin upward, forcing me to look, stop looking down, let me see those eyes...they shin up at him- wet glass nice- yet shy.

~*~

'Maggie- Liv,' he repeats, the first time... since we met that he has ever used my full name. You do not need to know that it sucks ass. Heat rushes through me like never- ever before it was like a barning fart from my ass hole. For the first time in my life, I am not afraid of the words they all say.

Something yawns open inside of me, to stretch out like a girl on her bed, like a pussy trying to soak up the sun, into the bargain I am desperate for him to say it again.

Like- her voice is endlessly soft. Her eyes are warm and flecked with light, like a dream of her in a perfect way- the color of the sun melting like butter through the trees on a warm autumn evening.

~*~

Ray- That's when it happens, the crying and crap, standing there is- sandwiched between two disgusting dumpsters in some crappy lane with the whole world crumbling, down around me, and hearing Kellie say those words, all the fear I have carried with me since myself scholarly to sit, stand, breathe- since I was told that at the very heart of me was something wrong, something rotten and diseased, something to be suppressed- since I was told that I was always just a heartbeat away from being damaged- all of it vanishes at once.

(More judgments)

That thing- the heart of hearts of me, the core of my core -stretches and unfurls even further, soaring like a flag: making me feel stronger than I ever have before. His fingers skate the edge of my chin, dance briefly over my lips. 'You should know that like- you have to know that.'

'As well as I love you too.'

Nevaeh- I thought back on it I think the band teacher, though I would have picked up a little girl, to my lips and played her like a flute; she horizontal like... he would look at me and- 'I say that what I thought you would do you're

that stupid to- mix this thing up.' Me- as I thought, that was the sound hole down there on her blowing into her vagina.' Otherwise, he would have thought that what I would to someone we eye's- like on me doing nothing wrong. I said- 'She made the same sound as the band didn't, she- not as freak at that one drum you tuned?'

Ray- I open my mouth and say, 'I love you too.' Ray looks hazy dazed and confused, even though he is crouching no more than a foot away from me.

'Hey, look at me.' I say with longing for his look. My eyes opened he took me there full of delightful energy, I have now, don't you see?

He looks at me saying these very words-

'You must be hungry,' he says gently.'

'Let us get you home, okay?' 'Are you okay?' He spoke.

'Now are you okay to walk?'

He shuffles back a little, giving me space to stand.

'No.' It comes out more emphatically than I had intended, and Ray looks startled.

'You're not okay to walk?'

A little crease appears between his eyebrows.

'No.' It is a struggle to keep my voice at a normal volume. 'I mean I cannot go home. At all.' He sighs and rubs his forehead. I think he will be happy, but instead, he just seems tired.

He looks away, squinting. 'Listen, Liv, it has been a long day. You are exhausted. You are hungry lust, desire, and your wanting, with complete pain.'

You are not thinking clearly... do not you see.' The same path you are going down- I see her dad said to her.

'I am thinking clearly.' I feel that- I feel freaked up! Did I die some when she did? Dyeing on the inside... are you for her now? I haul myself to my feet, hopeless, so I do not look so helpless. I am angry at this boy, too- even though I know this is not his fault, what- so- ever.

‘Hello: I am your mind, giving you someone to talk to.’ But then again, the fury is whipping around inside of me, undirected, gaining force. ‘I cannot stay here Ray.

Not anymore...

Not after- not after... after that.’

My throat spasms as I swallow back the scream again. ‘They knew, my boy. They knew and they never told me how they felt about him.’ How do you feel about him now?

He climbs to his feet too- slowly for my liking, like- it hurts him or some shit like that. ‘You don’t know that for sure,’ he says. I cut him off by the pass. Asking- ‘You don’t get it.’ A scream is welling inside of me, a black creepy-crawly scrabbling in my throat. All I can think is- they knew it was known.

They all knew- mom and dad and even my girl- Rachel- and still they let me believe all along that she was dead. They let me believe she had left me.

They let me believe I was not worth it. I am filled, suddenly, with white-hot anger, ablaze: If I see them, if I am going home, I will not be able to stop myself. I will not...do not you see this? I will burn the freaking apartment building down now, or tear it apart, plank by plank. ‘I want to run away with you. To the countries like the girl in the story. Like we talked about.’

‘I do know... do you?’

I insist, and it is true. I do know, deep down. I think of my mother 2 bent over me, the floating pale whiteness of her face breaking through my sleep, her voice- I love you. Remember...? They cannot take all the shit inside like me.

I see Hanna- sung quietly in my ear, the sad little smile dancing on her lips.

She knew too. She must have known they were coming for her and would take her to that terrible place. Besides only a week later, I sat in a scratchy black dress in front of an empty coffin with a pile of orange peels to suck on, trying to keep back tears, not once more of them one girl I love while everyone- I believed inbuilt around me a solid, smooth surface of lies and red eyes. (‘She was sick’ ‘This is what the disease does call.’ ‘Suicide.’) I was the one who was buried that day. ‘I cannot go home, and I will not. I will go with you. I ran... I ran... with him and his many...

~*~

'Liv... if you leave- leave-it will not be like it is for me now. You get that, right? You will not be able to go back and forth. You will not be able to come back ever. we dated, yet not known to anyone. Your number will be invalidated.

Everyone will know you are a cheater. Everyone will be looking for you. If anyone found, you-if you were ever caught.'

Ray does not finish his sentence. She has gone so yah date the friend-right all the same no. 'Listen, liv. I am sorry. I know you have had- I mean, with the whole thing that comes about today- I cannot imagine how sensitive you must be.'

We can make our home in the Wildernesses. Other individuals do it, don't they? Other people have done it. My mother, I want to say, my mother is going to do it, but my voice breaks into the word. Ray is watching me carefully and wondering why. 'I don't care,' I snap back saying, I am no longer able to control my temper. 'You were the one who suggested it, weren't you? So, what...? Now...? I am ready to go, you take it back?' I said shouting.

'I'm just trying to- forget it.'

I cut Ray off again, rapidly firing my mouth, coasting on the anger, the desire to shred, and hurt and tear apart. 'You are just like everybody else. You are as bad as all the rest of them. Conversation, exchange, dialog- it comes so easily to you. Nevertheless, when it is time to do whatever thing when it is time to help me...'

'I'm trying to help you...' Ray says sharply... 'It is important...

Do you- understand that...? It is a huge choice- I must make or pick it here... in addition to that, he is so pissed at me for what...? As well as you do not know what you are saying to me.'

He is getting angry too, the tone of his voice makes something painful run through me like a butt end of a spoon- blunt, but I cannot stop speaking.

Sometimes you even must give them up. Ray and I talk about all the things I will be leaving behind to go with him to the wilderness. He wants to be sure that I know what we are getting into. Stopping by Bakery after closing and buying the day-old bagels, and cheddar buns for a dollar each; sitting out on the piers and watching the gulls shriek and circle overhead; long runs up by the

farms when the dew glistens off every blade of grass as though they are encased in glass; the constant rhythm of the oceans, beating under Pittsburgh.

~*~

Karly- 'I'm fine...' I push around some ravioli on my plate and slips down my chin, then I total my fork, and one falls on my boob. Normally, I can put away half a box myself, especially after a long run or beating off my guitar or body. Same thing with me... (and still, have room for dessert creamy no!), but I have barely managed to choke down a few bites. 'Just stressed.'

'Leave her alone,' my mom 2 says.

'She is upset about the evaluations. They did not exactly turn out as planned.'

She lifts her eyes to my uncle, and they exchange glances. I feel a rush of excitement. It is rare for my mom and dad to look at each other like that, a wordless glance, full of meaning. like a heartbeat, the narrow-paved streets of the old harbor, shops crowded with bright, pretty clothes- I could never afford, yet this thing I have is \$10,000 that she gave up for this shit- for popularly, she not my big sis to me- she is not... any longer.

~*~

Put an end to, destroy, abolish, I want to break everything- him, me, us, the whole city, the entire world.

I sing this shit- "Do not treat me like a child," I say. I am loving, not a fighter respectable to women, I am not Chris Brown I do not feel the need to hit 'em, it's sad to see 12-year-old acting like a little ho, Takin' naked pictures while she is livin' in her parents' home Post 'em up on Twitter, it would make u reconsider. Every time you go online to find a babysitter. Sometimes it makes me wanna blow my f*ckin head off!

But do not listen to a word I say, because it does not mean a thing... The world is full of hypocrites, and I am the freaking king, it is not like I mean it, we are all in agreement. As soon as u hear this freaking song, I am sure you will just delete it...'

Yep!

I get this, don't you?

‘Then stop acting like one,’ he rips off back at me. The second words are out of his mouth- I can tell he regrets them. He turns partially away, inhales, and then says, in a normal tone of voice... It is strange, but after that moment in the passageway I suddenly understand the meaning of my full name, the reason my mom named me Maddie- Liv in the first place, and the meaning of the old biblical story, of Joseph and his abandonment of Mary Madeleine. I understand that he gave her up for a reason. He gave her up so she could be saved, even though it killed him to let her go.

He gave her up for love.

My mother had a sense even when I was born that she would someday have to do the same thing. I guess that’s just part of loving people:

You must give things up. Trace and Sana and the other girls are my only regrets. The rest of Pittsburgh. Can dissolve into nothing, for all I care: its shiny, spindly false towers and blind storefronts, and staring, obedient people, bowing their heads to receive more lies, like animals offering themselves up to be slaughtered.

‘If we go together, it’s just you and me,’ Ray keeps repeating, as though needing to make sure I understand-as though needing to be sure that, I am sure.

‘No going back. Ever.’ And I say: ‘That is all I want. Just you and me... always.’

I mean it too... I am not even afraid. Now that I know I will have him- that we have each other- I feel as though I will never be afraid of anything ever again.

We decided to leave Pittsburgh. in a week, exactly nine days before my scheduled procedure. I am nervous about delaying our departure so long- I am halfway tempted to make a straight run for the border fence and try to barge my way through in broad daylight- but as Explain sentences usual, Marcel tranquillities me down and explains the importance of waiting. In the past few years, he has made the crossing only a handful of times. It is too dangerous to go back and forth more often than that. But in the next week, Marcel will cross twice before we make our final escape-an almost suicidal risk, but he convinces me it is necessary. Once he leaves with me and starts missing work and class, he will be invalidated too-even though, technically, his identity was never valid in the first place, since it was created by the battle.

And once we are both canceled, we will be erased from the system.
Gone.

Blip!

~*~

Everyone turns to look at me, even Tracie, who puckers her nose and tilts her head like a dog sniffing at something new.

‘Are you okay, Liv?’ my uncle asks, adjusting his glasses as though hoping to bring me into a clearer focus. ‘You seem a little strange.’

Most of the time their interactions are limited to the usual thing-my uncle tells stories about work, my aunt tells stories about the neighbors. What is for dinner? There is a leak in the roof. Blah blah blah. I think that for once they are going to mention the Wilds and the Invalids. But then my uncle gives a minute shake of his head.

‘These kinds of mix-ups happen all the time,’ he says, staking a ravioli with his fork. ‘Just the other day, I asked Andrew to reorder three cases of Vik’s orange juice. But he gets the codes wrong and guess what shows up? Three cases of baby formula. I said to him, I said, ‘Andrew -’ I tune the conversation out again, grateful that my uncle is a talker, and happy that my aunt has taken my side. The one good thing about being shy is that nobody bugs you when you want to be left alone. I lean forward and sneak a glance at the clock in the kitchen.

Seven-thirty, and we have not even finished eating. And afterward, I will have to help clear and wash the dishes, which always takes forever; the dishwasher uses up too much electricity, so we must do them by hand. Outside, the sun is streaked with filaments of gold and pink. It looks like the candy that gets spun at the Sugar Shack downtown, all gloss and stretch, and color. It will be a beautiful sunset tonight. At that moment the urge to go was so strong, I must squeeze the sides of my chair to keep from suddenly springing up and running out the door. Finally, I decided to stop stressing and leave it to luck, or fate, or whatever you want to call it. If we finish eating, and I am done cleaning up the dishes in time to make it to Back and Gold Cove, I will go. If not, I will stay. I feel a million times better once I have made the decision, and even manage to shovel down a few more bites of ravioli before Jenny (miracle of miracles) have a sudden late burst of speed and cleans her plate, and my aunt

announces I can clear the dishes whenever I am ready. The truth is, I do not know what would happen. I have never broken curfew.

Just as I have finally accepted that there is no way to get to Back Cove and back in time, my aunt does the unthinkable. As I am reaching forward to take her plate, she stops me. 'You do not have to clean the dishes tonight, Lena. I will do them.'

As she is speaking, she reaches out and puts a hand on my arm. Just like earlier, the touch is as fleeting and cool as the wind. And before I can think about what this means, I am blurting out, 'Actually, I have to run to Hanna's house quickly,' I stand up and start stacking everyone's plates. It is eight o'clock. Even if I can wash all the dishes in fifteen minutes and that is a stretch-it will still be difficult to get to the beach by eight-thirty. And forget about making it back by nine o'clock, when the city has a mandated curfew for all under-agers. And if I got caught on the streets after curfew.

'Now?' A look of alarm or suspicion? flickers across my aunt's face. 'It's nearly eight o'clock.' 'I know. We-she-she has a study guide she was supposed to give me. I just remembered.' Now the look of suspicion-it is suspicion, makes itself comfortable, drawing her eyebrows together, cinching her lips. 'You do not have any of the same classes. And your boards are over. How important can it be?'

'It's not for class.' I roll my eyes, trying to conjure up Hanna's nonchalance, even though my palms are sweating, and my heart is jerking around in my chest.

'It is like a guide full of pointers. For the evaluations. She knows I need to prep more since I almost choked yesterday.' Again, my aunt directs a small glance at my uncle. 'Curfews in an hour,' she says to me. 'If you get caught out after curfew.'

I have never spoken back to her, have always tried to be as patient, obedient, and good as possible-have always tried to be as invisible as possible, a nice girl who helps with the dishes and the little kids and does her homework and listens and keeps her head down. I know that I owe mom for taking Kellie. Nervousness makes my temper flare. 'I know about curfew,' I snap... 'I've only been hearing about it for my whole life.' I feel guilty the second that the words are out of my mouth, and I drop my eyes to avoid looking at Carol. and me in after my mother died. If it were not for her, I would be wasting away in one of the orphanages, uneducated, unnoticed, destined for a job at a slaughterhouse

cleaning guts or cow crap or something like that. Maybe- maybe! - if I were lucky, I would get to work for a cleaning service. No foster parent will adopt a child whose past has been tainted by the disease.

I wish I could read her mind. I have no idea what she is thinking, but she is analyzing me, attempting to read my face. I am not doing anything wrong, it is harmless, I am fine, over, and over, and wipe my palms on the back of my jeans, positive I am leaving a sweat mark.

‘Be quick,’ she says finally, and as soon as the words are out of her mouth, I am off, jetting upstairs and converting my sandals for sneakers. Then I bang back down the stairs and fly out the door. She barely had time to take the dishes into the kitchen. She calls something to me as I blur past her, but I am already pushing out the front door and do not catch what she says. The ancient grandfather clock in the living room starts booming out just as the screen door swings shut behind me.

Eight o’ three clock. I unlock my bike and pedal it down the front path and out into the street. The pedals creak and moan and shudder. This bike was owned by my cousin Marcia before me and must be at least fifteen years old and leaving it outside all year is not doing anything to preserve it.

I started cruising in the direction of Back Cove, which is downhill, fortunately. The streets are always empty at this time of night. The cured are inside, sitting at dinner, or cleaning up, or preparing for bed and another night of dreamless sleep, and all the uncured are home or on their way there, nervously watching the minutes swirl away toward nine o’clock four curfews. My legs are still aching from my run earlier today. If I make it to Back and Gold Cove on time and Ray is there, I am going to be a complete mess, sweaty and disgusting.

However, I will keep going anyway. Now that I am out of the house I push all my doubts and questions out of my mind and focus on hauling ass as fast as my cramping legs will allow me, spinning down through the vacant streets toward the cove, taking every shortcut I can think of, watching the sun descend steadily toward the blazing gold line of the horizon, as though the sky-a brilliant, electric blue at this point is water, and the light is just sinking through it.

I have only been out at this hour a few times on my own, and the feeling is strange-frightening and exhilarating at the same time, like talking to Ray out in the open earlier this afternoon: as though the revolving eye that I know is

always watching has been blinded just for a fraction of a second, as though the hand you have been holding your whole life suddenly disappears and leaves you free to move in any direction you want. Lights sputter in windows around me, candles, and lanterns, mostly; this is a poor area, and everything is rationed, especially gas and electricity.

After a minute's rest, I keep pedaling, slower now. I am still about a mile away, but the cover is visible, flashing off to my right. The sun is just teetering over the dark mass of trees on the horizon. I have ten, fifteen minutes' tops until total darkness. At a certain point I lose sight of the sun's position beyond the four- and five-story buildings, which grow more densely packed after I turn onto Preble: tall, skinny, dark buildings, pressed up against one another as though already preparing for winter and huddling for warmth. I have not thought about what I will say to Marcel, and the idea of standing alone with him suddenly makes my belly bottom out. I must pull my bike up abruptly, stop and catch my breath. My heart is pounding frantically.

Then another thought nearly stops me, hitting me traditionally like a fist: He will not be there. I will be too late, and he will leave. Or this will turn out to be a big joke or a trick.

I wrap one arm around my stomach, willing the ravioli to stay put and pick up speed again.

Part: 12

I was having a fantastic dream until he awakens to reality, he was not dreaming, I was taking advantage of his morning 'Hard On.' It was very cold outside, but he was sweating from the heat Annie was putting out. When Annie tasted his pre-cum, she rode him slowly and deeply. I got off and repeated her slow, deep, and wet oral of what she calls 'MY- Penis.' This went on for an hour before Ray exploded like a burst pipe under full pressure.

Daddy will never know...

I was too exhausted to talk once again, but I spoke up and said, 'Thank you, Honey.' He was just barely able to speak and said not this time baby, thank you for loving me. I crawled up on me and told him what she does for him, she does for herself.

Listen to me... was said, if you are happy, I am happy. Besides, you gave me a great Christmas. If I cannot please my man, why am I here? Like I said yesterday, Teddy, marriage is so easy, loving you is easier. He did not say a

word, he just pulled me on top of him and just held her like he did not ever want to let her go.

I tried to get up and prepare breakfast for him, but he would not let her go. So, Annie decided to use her trump card. This was... said in her sexy playful voice, you have not measured my pregnant butt in three days. He immediately reaches out and felt her ass.

When you are pregnant, how fast does it grow? I said if this were my second child, he I could tell you, but I do not have a clue. Get the tape measure and measure my stomach and butt. He released me and ran to the bathroom to get the tape. Wow, he shouted, your stomach is out another inch. Then the drum roll and the tally on the size of her ass. It has also grown an inch.

I thought she had played him and was out of bed and on her way to getting dressed. Raymon had another plan, he grabbed her and said I will let you go on one condition. She gave a hum and said what is that illness. He said- wear that Santa's helper outfit and I will let you go. I laughed and said OK, that is a deal, I love that outfit.

It took him about five minutes to realize I left without bathing him. He ran downstairs and said I made a mistake honey on our deal. I said a deal is a deal teddy boy. But then again you know how I look forward to you bathing me. Annie stopped preparing breakfast, walked up to Teddy, and asked if he was serious about her bathing him.

He kissed her on her forehead and told her he loved it when she bathed him.

He when on to tell her it not just his penis wash, but they are together in an intimate setting, alone, it as good as having sex with her. He when on to say they laugh, talk about nothing serious, and looks forward to that at least twice daily. I said, I guess the coffee can wait because you cannot. I am about to speed through the long-defunct traffic light at Baxter when I am suddenly dazzled by a wall of zipping, bouncing light: the beams of a dozen flashlights directed into my eyes, so I must skid abruptly to a halt, lifting a hand to my face and nearly flipping over the handlebars-which would be a real disaster, since in my rush to get out of the house I forgot to bring my helmet.

'Stop,' the voice of one of the regulator's barks out-the leader in charge of the patrol, I guess. 'Identity check.' I am so busy circling one foot after the

other left, right, left, right-and doing a mental tug-of-war with my digestive tract, that I do not hear the regulators coming.

Clusters of regulators-both volunteer citizens and the actual regulators laboring by the government-patrol the streets every night, looking for uncured breaking curfew, checking the streets and (if the curtains are open) houses for unapproved activity, like two uncured touching each other, or walking together after dark-or even two cured engaging in 'activity that might signal the reemergence of the deliria after the procedure,' like too much hugging and kissing. This rarely happens, but it does happen.

Regulators report directly to the government and work closely with the scientists in the labs.

Watchdogs were responsible for sending my mother off for her third procedure; a passing patrol saw her crying over a photograph one night right after her second failed treatment. She was looking at a picture of my father, and she had forgotten to close the curtains all the way. Within days, she was back at the labs. Customarily it is easy to avoid the regulators. You can practically hear them from a mile away. They carry walkie-talkies to coordinate with other patrolling groups, and the static interference of the radios going on and off makes it sound like a giant buzzing den of hornets is heading your way. I just was not paying attention. Mentally cursing myself for being so stupid, I fish my wallet out of my back pocket. At least I remembered to grab that. It is illegal to go without ID in Pitt. The last thing anybody wants is to spend the night in jail while the authorities try to verify your validity. 'Magdalena Ellahaj,' I say, trying to keep my voice steady, as I pass my ID to the regulator in charge. I can hardly make him out behind his flashlight, which he keeps trained on my face, forcing me to squint. He is big; that is all I know. Tall, thin, angular.

'Ella,' he repeats. He flips my ID over between his long fingers and looks at my identity code, a number assigned to every citizen of the USA. The first three digits identify your state, the next three your city, the next three your family group, the next four your identity. 'And what are you doing, highway shit? Curfew's in less than forty minutes.' Less than forty minutes. That must mean it is eight-thirty. I shift on my feet, trying hard not to betray impatience. A lot of the regulators- especially the volunteer ones-are poorly paid city techs: window washes or gas-meter readers or security guards. I take a deep breath and say as innocently as possible, 'I wanted to take a quick ride down to Back and Gold Cove.' I do my best to smile and look stupid.

‘I was feeling bloaty after dinner.’ No point in lying any more than that. I will just get myself in trouble. The lead regulator continues to examine me, the flashlight directed glaringly at my face, my ID card in his hand. For a second, he seems to waver, and I am sure he is going to let me go, but then he passes my ID to another regulator. ‘Run it through with SVS, will you? Make sure it is valid.’ My heart plummets.

SVS is the Secure Validation System, a computer network where all the valid citizenships, for every single person in the entire country, are stored. It can take twenty to thirty minutes for the computer system to match codes, depending on how many other people are calling into the system. He cannot think I have forged an identity card, but he is going to waste my time while someone checks. And then, unbelievably, a voice pipes up from the back of the group. ‘She is valid, Gerry. I recognize her. She comes into the store. Lives at 119 Phillie.’ Gerry swings around, lowering his flashlight in the process. I blink away the floating dots in my vision. I recognize a few faces vaguely-a women who work in the local dry cleaners and spends her afternoons leaning in the doorway, chewing gum and occasionally- spitting out into the street; the traffic officer who works downtown near Franklin Pretrial, one of the few areas of Pittsburgh that have enough car traffic to justify one; one of the guys who collect our garbage-and there, in the back, Deved Howard, who owns the Walmart down the street from my apartment.

He is super skinny and has hooded black eyes that remind me of a rat. But tonight, I feel like I could hug him. I did not even think he knew my name. He never said a word to me except, ‘Will that is all today?’ after he has rung up my purchases, glowering at me from underneath the heavy shade of his eyelids. I make a mental note to thank him the next time I see him. Normally my uncle brings home most of our groceries-canned goods and pasta and sliced meats from his combo deli and convenience store, Save a lot, all the way over on

Monroy Hill, but occasionally or Bilo, if we are desperate for toilet paper or milk, I will run out to Walmart. Mr. Howard has always creeped me out. Gerry hesitates for a fraction of a second longer, but I can see that the other regulators are starting to get restless, shifting from foot to foot, eager to continue the patrol and find someone to bust.

Gerry must sense it too because he jerks his head abruptly in my direction.

‘Let her have the ID.’ Relief makes me want to laugh, and I must struggle to look serious as I take my ID and tuck it into place. My hands are shaking ever so slightly. It is strange how being around regulators will do that to you.

Even when they are being nice, you cannot help but think of all the bad stories you have heard -the raids, the beatings, and the ambushes. ‘Just be careful,’ Marcel says, as I straighten up. ‘Make sure your home before curfew.’ He tilts his flashlight into my eyes again. I lift my arm to my eyes, squinting against the dazzle. ‘You wouldn’t want to get into any trouble.’

~*~

And I am only a few minutes from Back Cove. My heart picks up its rhythm as I think about skidding down the sloping hill of grass, seeing Marcel framed against the last, dazzling rays of sun-as I think about that single word breathed into my ear.

~*~

Marcel says it lightly, but for a moment I hear something hard running under his words, a current of anger or aggression. But then I tell myself I am just being paranoid. Nope no matter what the regulators do, they exist for our protection, for our oral rights.

The regulators sweep away in a group around me, so for a few seconds, I am caught up in a tide of rough shoulders and cotton jackets, unfamiliar cologne, and sweat smells. Walkie-talkies sputter to life and fade away again around me. I catch snippets of words and broadcasts: Market Street, a girl, and a boy, infected, unapproved music on St. Paul’s, someone is dancing - I get bumped side to side against arms and chests and elbows until finally, the group passes, and I spit out again, left alone on the street as the regulators’ footsteps grow more distant behind me. I wait until I can no longer hear the fuzz of their radio chatter or their boots hitting the pavement. Then I take off, feeling again a lifting sensation in my chest, that same sense of happiness and freedom. I cannot believe how easy it was to get out of the house. I never knew I could lie to my aunt- I never knew I could lie, period-and when I think about how narrowly I escaped getting grilled by the regulators for hours, it makes me want to jump up and down and pump my fist in the air.

Tonight, the entire world is on my side. I tear down the street, which loops around the last mile down to Back and Gold Cove. And then I stop short. The buildings have fallen away behind me, giving way to ramshackle sheds,

sparsely situated on either side of the cracked and run-down road. Beyond that, a short strip of tall, weedy grass slants down toward the cove. The water is an enormous mirror, tipped with pink and gold from the sky.

In that single, blazing moment as I come around the bend, the sun-curved over the dip of the horizon like a solid gold archway-lets out its final winking rays of light, shattering the darkness of the water, turning everything white for a fraction of a second, and then falls away, sinking, dragging the pink and the red and the purple out of the sky with it, all the color bleeding away instantly and leaving only dark.

Marcel was right, I was he not...?

The regulators must have been wrong about the time. It must be after eight-thirty now. It was gorgeous-one of the best I have ever comprehended.

For a moment I cannot move or do anything but stand there, breathing hard,

staring. Then an emotionlessness creeps over me. I am too late. Uniform if Marcel decides to wait for me somewhere along the long loop of the cove, I do not have a prayer of finding him and making it home before curfew.

My eyes sting and the world in front of me goes watery, colors and shapes sloshing together. For a second, I think I must be crying, and I am so startled I forget forgetting about my disappointment and frustration, forget about Marcel standing on the beach, the thought of his hair catching the dying rays of the sun, flashing copper.

I cannot remember the last time I cried. It has been years. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, and my vision sharpens again.

It is just sweat, I realize, relieved; I am sweating, it is getting in my eyes. Still, the sick, leaden feeling will not work its way out of my stomach. I stay there for a few minutes, straddling my bike, squeezing the handlebars hard until I am a little bit calmer. Part of me wants to say, screw it, to shove off, both legs extended, and go flying down the hill toward the water with the wind whipping up my hair- screw curfew, screw the regulators, screw everyone. But I cannot; I could not; I could never. I have no choice. I must get home.

On the way home I tell myself that it is for the best. I must be crazy, zooming around in the half-dark just to meet up with some guy on the beach.

Besides, everything has been explained: He works at the labs, just snuck in on evaluation day for some completely innocent reason-to use the bathroom or refill his water bottle. And I remind myself that I imagined the whole thing-the message, the meeting up. He is sitting in his apartment somewhere, doing coursework for his classes. I maneuver my bike around in a clumsy circle and start back up the street. Now that the adrenaline and excitement have faded, my legs feel like they are made out made iron I am panting before I have gone a quarter of a mile. This time I am careful to stay alert for regulators, constabularies, and patrols.

He has already forgotten about the two girls he met at the lab multifaceted today. He was just being nice earlier, making casual discussion.

It is for the best. But no matter how many times I repeat it, the strange, hollow feeling in my stomach does not go away. And ridiculous as it is, I cannot shake the persistent, needling feeling that I have forgotten something, or missed something, or lost something forever. Of all the systems of the body-neurological, cognitive, special, sensory-the cardiological system is the most sensitive and easily disturbed. The role of society must be to shelter these systems from infection and decay, or else the future of humans is at stake.

Food and me not friends- like- 'I cut my finger and used a can opener one-handed.' I was done...

Part: 13

Movie time- 'Hey Pixar, maybe put some louder music in those sad moments so a bitch can sniffle undetected.'

#- Hashtag- (Inside Out)

'So- infected with deliria and in violation of the pacts of society, she fell in love with men who would not have her or could not keep her.' Similarly, a summer fruit that is protected from insect invasion, streak, and rot by the whole mechanism of modern farming; so, must we protect the heart. Her last love, they say, was the greatest: a man named Jo, an unmarried person all his life, who found her on the street, bruised and broken and half-crazy from hallucinations.

We learned all about it in Biblical Science. First, there was John, then Matthew, then Jeremiah and some other one I can recall as of now, and Judas, and many other nameless men in-between.

There is some debate about what kind of man Jo was- whether he was righteous or not, whether he ever succumbed to the disease-but in any case, he took diligent care of her. He nursed her to health and tried to bring her peace.

By this time, however, it was too late. She was tormented by her past, haunted by the love's lost and damaged and ruined, by the evils she had inflicted on others and that others had inflicted on her. She could hardly eat; she wept all day; she clung to Joseph and begged him never to leave her but could not find comfort in his goodness.

And then one morning, she woke, and Joseph was gone without a word or an explanation. This final abandonment broke her at last and she fell to the ground, begging God to put her out of her misery.

He heard her prayers, and in his infinite compassion, he instead removed from her the curse of deliria, with which all humans had been burdened as punishment for the original sin of Eve and Adam. In a sense, Mary Magdalene was the very first cured.

'And so- after years of tribulation and pain, she walked in righteousness and peace until the end of her days.' I always thought it was strange that my mother named me Magdalena. She did not even believe in the cure. That was her whole problem. And the Book of Lamentations is all about the dangers of deliria. I have done a lot of thinking about- it, and in the end- I guess I have figured out that despite everything, my mother knew that she was wrong: that the cure, and the procedure, were for the best. I think even then she knew what she was going to do-she knew what would happen. My name was her final gift to me, away. It was a message. She was trying to say, Forgive me. She was trying to say, Someday, even this pain will be taken away.

Do you see it? No matter what everyone says, and despite everything, I know she was not all bad.

The next two weeks are the busiest of my life.

Like back on like- December 20th You know that lit girls must do that get ever longer- 'That thing where you haven't shaved your legs in a bit, so you decide to wait, and get a wax; but then you don't do that either.'

'Every year the same question: what are you supposed to buy men for Christmas? Besides socks or a sex doll? Merry Christmas! I hope everyone has put on at least 7 pounds today! Remember guys, the better she looks in that dress, the scarier her underwear is. Merry Christmas!

#- Hashtag: (Santa Brought Me Diabetes and Commando!)

Part: 14

Magazine time- 'No. 1...??? Half-naked supermodels in Mad Max and Y'all went to see awkward chicks sing and do vagina jokes?? This is a world I can get behind.' Sick...! >Look at this girl here< could be that, yet I fat and ugly. I so what to be them, or cute, at least that. I can eat a pie; God I feel overweight! At 100 pounds, and like four feet.

It is seven-thirty days before Christmas; his parents, or at least his dad, want to see his pregnant daughter-in-law. Ray's mother said her husband has been on cloud nine since hearing the news. I so-o excited to see his parents, his dad dick hanging out. I wanted them to stay at their house since they have the mother in lawsuits ready, but he said not before the baby is born. He wants to hear a newborn crying. Annie now knows where he gets his weird sense of humor.

I finished making hot cocoa and they are going to watch Christmas movies on TV. He for the tenth time in the last ten minutes asked how she was feeling. Annie said I am feeling great. Do you need or want anything? He said no, I am good. Annie told him- she is feeling a little neglected, he is not all over her like he used to be, and she misses that. I said- I just did not want to push you, or you know, I mean, I do not know when you are feeling your best. I said- calm down my daddy, when I am not feeling well, I will tell you OKAY. Pending then I want your hands all over me as you did before, I miss that. I found a good movie on TV and laid down between my legs hugging her thigh. Now and then he would kiss and suck her inner thigh. Annie patted him on his head and said that he was my good boy.

Christmas was on a Saturday this year; we had taken two weeks off knowing- Teddy's parents were coming in and knowing they wanted time to themselves when it was all over. Timmy had called and said they would be over at six that evening and were bringing dinner. Annie was upstairs and called I call him my teddy to come to take a bath before Chuck and Liv showed up, we are friends even if she is older than I. Did he want to know why so early?

Annie said do not come, it is your loss. He ran like a flash.

When Ray entered the shower, he asked me what he was going to miss. I said in a minute, now hold still. When I got to the penis was, she dried her hands and told him to get that book from under a towel near the shower. He

opens the book and sees dates with fractions and some whole numbers by each date which is a week apart. I said I do not get it. What do they mean? By this time, I was having a good laugh. My- Teddy shouted what I am missing.

I said I do not know if I should tell you before I hand wash your dick. She said what these small numbers would have to do with my dick! I said- those numbers; those small numbers represent how much bigger my ass is getting every week. He shouted what! Your ass has gained three inches since Thanksgiving. Annie said yes, I am surprised you did not notice. That is why I told you last night I want doggie-style; I was hoping you would notice. Congratulation's honey, you are getting a bigger ass to play with, just what you wanted. He shouted yes, that is what I am talking about. I said yes, I am talking about how hard your dick got since I told you, but it easier to wash.

By the time- he and I got there. We had measured my ass six times. After the couple had eaten, they both wanted to talk to each other. Kelly was in the kitchen, with Liv, a new friend from middle school, when Ray called her.

Liv went and sat by Chuck. Liv started by saying how much they love me and him. Timmy then asked why they would like to get married on the same day as they got married, it is on a Friday next year and Annie will have given birth. Annie and Teddy said that is great. We feel honored that you would cherish our special day as your own.

I jumped up and hugged Liv, Ray- high.

The couple asked them to keep it quiet until they told their parents. They wanted to wait until little MY- Teddy was able to walk as the ring bearer, but he just wanted to marry Liv as soon as possible. I and Lisa at the same time said, 'How do you know it's going to be a boy!'

Timmy as cool as he could be, replied, 'My mom said her black hair, just like I was so full and shiny, just like I when she was pregnant with me, therefore, Kellie is carrying a boy.' Of course, I and Lisa laughed at him. Teddy just said, there is a lot of judgment in that statement. I and Lisa laughed at Teddy also.

Annie said I bet it was that doggie style that hurt you, you shot a pint in me, I thought your cum would never stop coming out of me. My- Teddy was just barely able to speak for laughing said, that was good, no, that was great. He kissed Annie and told her she might be right, that orgasm was different.

~*~

(In the shower)

I noticed her stomach was out just a little, she shouted at teddy to look at it and confirm. I told her it is ut a little cut. Hanna left the shower soaking wet to call her mother. He is standing there pleading with her to wait until after the penis wash. I was still laughing at him when her mother answered the phone. She asked her what she was laughing so hard about. I just said he was being silly. When I told her mom about her stomach, her mom told her to be at her house first thing in the morning so she could see it, or she could come to my house. She is very charged up about Karly maybe- pregnancy and she wants to experience every aspect of it.

When I finally returned to the shower, he was standing there with the tape measure.

Annie said oh, you want to measure my stomach. Teddy said I only measure your ass; you can measure your stomach. I was playing with it turned around and bent over. He went 'WOW' that ass is getting huge. I stood up and started to hit Ray, then said I will let you have your seven and half months of fun. I started to laugh and told her to show her- pussy and her breast will get bigger also, will you measure them. I said no, I have a flashlight to inspect that monster to me, and my hands for your breasts. They both started laughing.

With three days to go before Christmas, I told her he would drive her to her parents' house. I did not want to take any chances with the holiday traffic. As they were driving, I asked him if they could ride around tonight and watch the Christmas lights. He told her that would be great. They could grab some sandwiches from Timmy and get some cocoa. I said I will make the cocoa the way you like it, and we can get just the sandwiches from Bill's.

I have created a grandma to be a monster with her mom. She was going crazy over Hannie's baby bump that he made for her. Then Mrs. Irene said that the butt was getting big. That made me smile, which Mrs. Irene noticed. Then she did the big no-no, she called his mom and told her about I bump. Instead of flying out tomorrow evening, his parents, his mom, are flying out first thing in the morning.

Do it more so not then...

~*~

I got out of the hot shower, and my damp body was still wrapped in a towel when Ray commanded, 'Come to me, baby.' That stimulating, stern voice

was coming from above me. My stomach did flips just as I stopped at the entrance of the walk-in closet. That domineering voice had me hypnotized. It was sexy, guiding, welcomed, and turned me on. I started panting, my body tingling and warming. That overassertive tone which he used spoke volumes of what he had planned. I did not know if I was going to get palmer and such- (Ray's assertive yet loving palm against my ass cheeks) I turned and looked up at the second level of the walk-in closet, and he was leaning on the railing, looking pointedly at me, shirtless and barefoot. That was a glorious, breathtaking view.

With my eyes set on him, I obeyed and climbed the stairs at an even pace. The further I climbed to the second level, gazing steadily at his, the more he lured me in.

My pussy was already thumping, preparing itself for Ray's huge invasion, in any position he so desired. When I finally reached him, he stood directly in front of me, our bodies barely touching, pulled the towel free from me with authority, and, with his delectable lips a mere inch from mine, he seductively said, 'This towel has no use; it's only a distraction.' He threw it to the floor.

The heat his body radiated told of the inferno within. He was burning with desire, and I knew a short sex-ing was not going to put out that fire- she and I were going to be up all night long. I felt the goosebumps form on my skin just as he softly nuzzled against my neck, groaning under his breath, until he gently bit my earlobe and demanded, 'Follow me inside you.' Always obedient, I followed him deeper into the closet, admiring the back view of his sexy, toned body and nice tight ass in a pair of black low-rise lounge pants he wore. He leaned against one of the necktie racks, left ankle over right, barefoot, and with his sculpted arms crossed across his chiseled chest. With his eyes fixed on me and burning with undeniable, shameless need, he motioned his head to a pair of burgundy, four and a half-inch pink cuff fuzzy pumps in the center of the room and said, 'Put them on.'

With a smile, I obeyed, slipping my right foot in first and bending over to buckle the ankle strap. I did not need to look in Ray's direction to see if he was taking in the sight- I felt his eyes on me, swallowing me whole. After I got the left shoe on, I looked down at my feet, turning each foot in various angles, loving how beautiful they looked on my feet.

He made his way to me, his hot, hard body pressed close against mine, and while gesturing his left hand in an offering manner, he commanded, 'Pick a tie.' At the sound of that, my heart skipped a beat and then picked up the pace.

He had never ordered or given me that option before. Pick a tie... What was Ray about to do to me? He knew I would be baffled, and that I was as I stood in shock, staring at him in my naked glory, nipples getting harder pussy wetter and a fire boiling in my own core. But then again, without delay, I walked over to the wall, gently brushed my left hand along a row of ties as I walked from one end of the closet to the other, adding fuel to the fire- teasing him oh so cutely- by swaying my hips and looking back at him over my shoulder. I felt sexy in my pumps and birthday suit, and the look on my husband's face said he thought so, too. I selected a red tie to match my new pumps and turned to Hannie with a smile.

'I choose this one,' I said you like this for him too?

'That one is for your left wrist,' he said with a smile equal to mine but firm enough that I knew he was in control of the events to follow. 'Now pick one for your right wrist.' I complied, and when I turned to hand the two to him, he took them from my hand and said, 'Now two more.' He set his gorgeous greenish-grey eyes on me before love the contacts- raising them back to meet eyes with me, his sexy medium-thick brows raised up some. Now his smile was a devilish grin, and all I could ask myself was, what is this sexy, forceful man of mine going to do to me?

Every day after school there is an assembly or ceremony, or graduation party to go to. Hana gets invited to all of them; I get invited to most, which surprises me. Marlowe has invited most of the graduating class- there are sixty-seven of us in total and fifty to the party-which makes me feel less special, but it is still fun.

We sit in the backyard while the housekeeper runs in and out of the house with plates and plates of food- coleslaw and potato salad and other barbecue stuff-and her father turns out spareribs and hamburgers on the enormous smoking grill. I eat until I feel like I am about to burst and must roll back onto the blanket I am sharing with Hanna. Kellie-who lives with Hanna in the Northern End, and whose father does something for the government-invites me to come over for a 'casual good-bye thing.' I did not even think she knew my name- whenever she is talking to Hanna her eyes have always skated past me like I am not worth focusing on. I go anyway. I have always been curious about her house, and it turns out to be as spectacular as I imagined. Summer explodes into Pitt.

In early June the heat was there but not the color-the greens were still pale and tentative, the mornings had a biting coolness-but by the last week of

school everything is Technicolor and splash, outrageous blue skies and purple thunderstorms and ink-black night skies and red flowers as bright as spots of blood.

Her family has a car, too, and electric appliances everywhere that get used every day, washers and dryers, and huge chandeliers filled with dozens and dozens of light bulbs.

We stay there until curfew, when the stars are peeking through a curtain of dark blue and the mosquitoes rise all at once and we all go shrieking and laughing back into the house, slapping them away. Afterward, it was one of the nicest days I have had in a long time.

Even girls I do not like-like Shy, who has hated me since sixth grade, when I won the science fair, and she took second place-start being nice. It is because we all know the end is close. Most of us will not see one another after graduation, and even if we do it will be different. We will be different. We will be adults-cured, tagged, and labeled, paired, identified, and placed neatly on our life path, perfectly round marbles set to roll down even well-defined slopes.

Theresa Grass turns eighteen before school ends and gets cured; so, does Shy-. They are absent for a few days and come back to school just before graduation.

It is like all their anxiety and self-consciousness has been removed along with the disease. Even my legs have stopped trembling. Whenever she used to have to speak in class, the trembling would get so bad it would rock the desk. But after the procedure, just like that-whoosh! The shaking stops.

Of course...

They are not the first girls in our class to get cured- Hanna and Hannie-Hahn were both cured ways back in the fall, and half a dozen other girls have had the procedure this past semester-but in them the difference is somehow more pronounced. The change is amazing. They seem peaceful now, mature, and somehow remote like they are encased in a thin layer of ice.

Only two weeks ago Theresa's nickname was Theresa Gross, and everyone made fun of her for slouching and chewing on the ends of her hair and being a mess, but now she walks straight and tall with her eyes fixed straight in front of her, her lips barely curled in a smile, and everyone shifts a little in the halls so she can pass easily. The same thing goes for her.

I keep going with my countdown. Eighty-one days, then eighty, then seventy-nine. Willow Marks never comes back to school. Rumors filter back to us that she had her procedure and it turned out fine; that she had her procedure and now her brain is going haywire, and they are talking about committing her to the Vaults, Pitts's combo prison-and mental- ward; that she ran away to the Wilds. Only one thing is for sure: The whole Marks family is under constant surveillance now. The regulators are blaming Mr. and Mrs. Parkings- and the whole extended family-for not instilling in her a proper education, and only a few days after she was found in Oaks Park next to the old school, I overheard my aunt and uncle whispering that both of Willow's parents have been fired from their jobs. A week later we hear that they had to move in with a distant relative. People kept throwing rocks at their windows, and a whole side of their house was written over with a single word: WELL-WISHES.

It makes no sense because Mr. and Mrs. Parkings were on record insisting that their daughter have the procedure early, despite the risks, but as my aunt says, people get like that when they are scared. Everyone is terrified that the deliria will somehow find its way into Pittsburgh on a large scale. Everyone wants to prevent an epidemic. And it may sound awful, but I do not think about Willow's family for long. There is just too much end-of-high school paperwork to file, and worried energy, and lockers to spotless out and final exams to take, and people to say goodbye to. I feel bad for the Marks family, of course, but that is the way things are. It is like the regulators: You may not like the patrols and the uniqueness checks, but since you know it is all done for your protection, it is dreadful not to liaise.

Part: 15

Hanna and I can barely find time to run together. When we do, we stick to our old routes by silent agreement. She never mentions the afternoon at the labs again, to my surprise.

Hanna's mind- tends to skip around, and her new obsession is a collapse at the northern end of the border that people are saying might have been caused by Invalids. I do not even consider going down to the labs again, not for one single solitary second. I focus on everything and anything besides my lingering questions about Marcel-which is not too hard, considering that I now cannot believe I spent an evening biking up and down the streets of Pitt, lying to Mom and the regulators, just to meet up with him.

On graduation day Hanna sits three rows ahead of me at the commencement ceremony. As she flies past me to take her seat she reaches out

for my hand- two long pumps, two short ones-and when she sits down, she tilts her head back the very next day it felt like a dream or a delusion. I tell myself I must have gone temporarily insane: brain scramble, from running in the heat. So, I can see that she has taken a marker and scrawled on the top of her graduation cap: THANK GOD! I stifle a laugh, and she turns around and makes a pretend-stern face at me. All of us are giddy, and I have never felt closer to the St. Anne's girls than that day-all of us sweating under the sun, which beams down on us like an exaggerated smile, fanning ourselves with the commencement brochures, trying not to yawn or roll our eyes while Principal Ass wipe drones on about 'adulthood' and 'our entrance into the community order,' nudging one another and tugging on the collars of our scratchy graduation gowns to try to let some air down our necks.

Family members sit in white plastic folding chairs, under a cream white tarp fluttering with flags: the school flag, the city flag, the state flag, the American flag. They applaud politely as each graduate goes up to receive her diploma. When it is my turn I scan the audience, looking for my aunt and my sister, but I am so nervous about tripping and falling as I take my place on the stage and reach for the diploma in the principal's hand, I cannot see anything but color- green, blue, white, a mess of pink and brown faces-or make out any individual sounds beyond the shush of clapping hands. Only Hanna's voice, loud and clear as a bell: Liz! That is our special pump- a chant that we used to do before track meets and tests, a combination of both of our names. Afterward, we lined up to take individual portraits with our diplomas. An official photographer has been hired, and a royal blue backdrop set up in the middle of the soccer field, where we all stand and pose. We are too excited to take the pictures seriously, though. People keep doubling over laughing in their pictures, so all you can see is the crown of their heads.

When it is my turn for a picture, at the very last second Hana jumps in and throws one arm around my shoulders, and the photographer is so startled he presses down on the shutter anyway.

Click! There we are: I am turning to Hana, mouth open, surprised, about to laugh. She is a full head taller than me, has her eyes shut and her mouth open. I do think there was something special about that day, something golden and even magic because even though my face was all red and my hair looked sticky on my forehead, it is like Hana rubbed off on me a little bit- because despite everything, and just in that one picture, I look pretty. More than pretty.

'We did it! We did it!' And none of the parents or teachers try to separate us. As we start to break away, I see them encircling us, watching with patient expressions, hands folded. I catch my aunt's gaze and my stomach does a weird twist and I know that she, like everyone else, is giving us this moment - our last moment together, before things change for good and forever. And things will change - be changing, even at that second.

Attractive, even. The school band keeps playing, mostly in tune, and the music floats across the field and is echoed by the birds wheeling in the sky. It is like something lifts at that moment, some huge pressure or divide, and before I know what is happening all my classmates are crushing together in a huge hug, jumping up and down and screaming, 'We did it! As the group dissolves into clumps of students, and the clumps dissolve into individuals, I notice Theresa Gross and Shy - already starting across the lawn toward the street. They are each walking with their families, heads down, without once looking back.

They have not been celebrating with us, I realize, and it occurs to me I have not seen Ray and Rena or Annie Pahnierz or the other cured's either. They must have already gone home. A curious ache throbs in the back of my throat, even though of course this is how things are: Everything ends, people move on, they do not look back.

It is how they should be. I catch sight of Rachel through the crowd and go running up to her, suddenly eager to be next to her, wishing she would reach down and ruffle my hair as she used to when I was extraordinarily little, and say, 'Good job, Loony,' her old nickname for me.

'Rachel!' I am breathless for no reason, and I have trouble squeezing the words out. I am so happy to see her I feel like I could burst into tears. I do not though.

'Congratulations, Lena.' I stick my face in the flowers and inhale, trying to fight down the urge to reach out and hug her.

'You came.'

'Of course, I came.' She smiles at me.

'You're my only sister, remember?' For a second, we just stand there, intermittent at each other, and then she reaches out to me. She passes me a bouquet of daisies she has brought with her, loosely wrapped in brown paper. I am sure she is going to put her arms around me for old times' sake, or at the very least give me a one-armed squeeze.

Instead, she just flicks a bang off my forehead. 'Gross,' she says, still smiling. 'You're all sweaty.' It is stupid and immature to feel disappointed, but I do. 'It's the gown,' I say and realize that yes, that must be the problem: The gown is what is choking me, stifling me, making it hard to breathe. All the voices intermingle and become indistinguishable from one another-like the constant white noise of the ocean running underneath the rhythm of the Pitt streets, so constant you hardly notice it. 'Come on,' she says. 'Mom will want to congratulate you.' Mom is standing at the field's periphery with my uncle, Grace, and Jenny, talking to Mrs. Panderer, my history teacher. I fell into step beside Rachel. She is only a few inches taller than I am and we walk together, coordinated, but separated by three feet of space. She is quiet. I can tell she is already wondering when she can go home and get on with her life.

I let myself look back once. I cannot help it. I watch the girls circulating in their orange gowns like flames. Everything seems to zoom back, recede away at once. Everything looks stark, vivid, and frozen, as though drawn precisely and outlined in ink-parents' smiles frozen, camera flashes blinding, mouths open and white teeth glistening, dark glossy hair and deep blue sky, and unrelenting light, everyone drowning in light-everything so clear and perfect

I am sure it must already be a memory or a dream.

H is for hydrogen, a weight of one; when fission's split, as brightly lit's hot as any sun.

He is for helium, a weight of two.

The noble gas, the ghostly pass That lifts the world anew.

Li is for lithium, a weight of three; A funeral pyre, when touched with fire- And deadly sleep for me. During the summers I must help my uncle at the Save a lot Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays, mostly stocking shelves and working behind the deli counter and occasionally helping with filing and accounting in the little office behind the cereal and dry goods aisle. Thankfully, in late June, Andrew Marcus got cured and reassigned to a permanent position at another grocery store.

On the Fourth of July, I head to Hana's house in the morning. Every year we go to see the fireworks at the Eastern Promenade.

In recent years Hanna and I have made it a kind of game to stay out until the last possible second, cutting it closer and closer every year.

Hana's last name is Tate, and we were linked up by alphabetical order (by then I was already going by my aunt's last name, Tiddle.)

Part: 16

A band is always playing, and vendors set up their carts, selling fried meat on skewers and corn on the cob and apple pie floating in a puddle of ice cream, served in little paper boats. The Fourth of July-the day of our independence, the day we commemorate the closing of our nation's border forever-is one of my favorite holidays. I love the music that pipes through the streets, love the way the steam rising thick from the grills makes the streets look cloudy, the people shadowy and unclear. I especially love the temporary extension of the curfew: Instead of being home at nine o'clock, all uncured are allowed to stay out until eleven. Last year I stepped into the house at 9:46 precisely, heart hammering in my chest, shaking with exhaustion- I would have to sprint home. But then again, I lay in bed I could not stop grinning. I felt like I had gotten away with something. I type in Hana's four-digit gate code- she gave it to me in eighth grade, saying it was 'a sign of trust' and that she had slit me 'from the top of the head to the heels' if I shared it with anyone else -and slip in through the front door. I never bother knocking. Her parents are hardly ever home, and Hana never answers the door. I am the only person who comes over to see her.

It is weird...

Hanna was always popular in school-people looked up to her and wanted to be like her-but even though she was friendly with everybody, she never really got close- close to anyone besides me. Sometimes I wonder whether she wishes she had been assigned a different desk partner in Mrs. Sariseraski's second-grade class, which is how we first became friends. I wonder whether she wishes she had been placed with Becca Jralawny, or Katie La-carp, or even Merissa Poinortofa. Sometimes I feel like she deserves a best friend who is just a little more special.

~*~

It felt as if my heart was ripped out of my chest. It was official; the doctors confirmed what I dreaded the most. You were dead. The doctor sadly told your mother the devastating truth. She raised her hand to her mouth and tears started to swell up into her eyes. I comforted her as she fell apart in her grief. Her child was gone. He passed away at four in the morning when his heart gave up. I shared her grief because I loved you so much that it hurt to know that

you were gone. Gone forever. Your funeral was a small private matter. It was a rainy June day when we were buried in the Irving Park Cemetery where your grandfather lay. Dressed in black, everyone you knew and loved you came to say goodbye. I stood beside your mother and held her hand as- she softly sobbed into her handkerchief. The priest in his clergy outfit moved his lips as he read passages from the Bible. As your casket lay down on the earth, there was silence.

On the night of your funeral, I never felt so empty in my life. You were a part of me, a part of my life. I loved you so much, but now you are gone. Your sister stayed with me that night, she told me how your death would change things between your mother and father, and I know this to be true.

Your sister stayed with me that night and in the morning, he was gone. She left me a letter and thanked me for letting her stay. She was leaving Chicago for good this time and told me to tell her mother that she loved her. In the weeks since your death, life went on or as they say, I moved on from the heartache. I was completing my degree at university. Remember, how you would tease me about being a bookworm. I thought English would be a good degree. My parents are doing well in the bakery. You used to love to go there. My parents have been understanding about your death to me and helped me through it. I spent the night there, at my folk's place. Maybe because my mother missed me and since I was already home, I might as well crash there.

There was no word from your sister. Your mother was frantic when she came over to my house. My mother comforted her when she sobbed. Becca was the only thing that held her together.

Your father, as your mother told us, was with his lover, and she never felt so alone. I knew Erica was in Europe, but I did not know if she meant when she said she would not come back.

Twilight lined the horizon the next morning, and for a while, I ran down the sidewalk across the neighbors of the community. The adrenaline hit me as I kicked off my feet. My breath was rugged; I was sweating but I kept going. I remembered how you would join me on my morning run, and we would run in silence but together. After the hard exhortation, we would collapse on the main empty football field of our former high school, and you would turn and smile, that wicked gleam in your eyes, and ask, 'Ever consider not giving a damn about the world, but think about yourself?'

I remember telling you I did not care about myself. I was, as my mother told me, selfless.

You would laugh, your blue eyes sparkling, and say, 'You must think of yourself for once, Emma. There is no crime in being selfish, even if only for a while.'

You were right that day, Alvin, I was selfish. I did not want you to die. I knew that you were suffering from depression, but I did not know how great you suffered. I knew things at home were hard, with your parents fighting all the time. Your father's drinking habits were stressing you out as well as your sister. But I should have told you your life was worth more than the suffering.

And now, I lay on the empty field, arms stretched out, and gasping for breath after all that running. The sun is coming out; the sky is changing to blue. I insert my earphones into my ears and click the play button where Bon Jovi's song always plays on:

It has been raining since you left me. Now I am drowning in the flood. You see I have always been a fighter. But without you, I give up. As I closed my eyes, I remembered the time you and I talked about death. We were fifteen at that time, and my grandmother had died to lose her battle with cancer. I remember how I sobbed hysterically, but you watched me with understanding in your eyes and a calm façade. Then you sat beside me after the funeral and you said, 'Do grieve for her. She would not want you too.'

I asked you how you could say such a thing, but you shook your head and said, 'Listen, Em. You know your grandma loved you and she loved you too. If you love her, you will not grieve for her. She is not coming back. I know it sounds harsh, but it is true. Death leaves a mark on the heart, but love gives you an everlasting memory, and in her memory, you should smile and think of the good things about your grandma, and by remembering, you will move on from the ache and sorrow.'

I asked you that day if you died would not you want any want to grieve for you? You smiled and laughed, 'That would be ridiculous,' you said, 'Why would anyone sob over me?' Then you calmed your eyes and said, 'Death is inevitable. It is complete where life begins. The wheel comes full circle.' 'If I die, do not grieve for me, she always remembers me. That is all I ask of you.' I opened my eyes when the flashback ended and got to my feet. There was no point in reliving the past for it was almost melancholic. I turned, not looking back, and continued with my run. It is July now. Summer was at its height, the

sun shone gold, the trees rustled in the wind, and I continued with life. I was there did I saw your sister. Erica smiled at me, and I was surprised to see her. She came over to me and we decided to head to Starbucks with her. We entered the shop and after ordering, I took my Frappuccino, and we sat in the nearest booth and talked.

I asked her how she was doing, and she told me that somehow after accepting that you were gone, she moved on and started looking on the brighter side of things. 'Becca wouldn't want me to grieve over him,' Bacca said to me, 'He would have wanted me to live my life. He would have wanted me to be happy.'

I tore at that and told her that was exactly what you wanted from her. She was your younger sister. You loved her.

'Mom and Dad are getting divorced,' Erica said, 'Alvin's death was the breaking point, although, I knew that everything was going bad before...' she trailed.

I asked how her mother was doing, and Erica sighed, 'Not well. She is still grieving.' I asked her if there was anything to help her, and Erica's blue eyes became shadowed, 'I don't know, Emma, but...' she swallowed, 'I'm scared she might...' I knew what your mother thought of. Suicide. The only option.' 'And I don't want that,' Erica said, 'I lost Alvin, and I don't want to lose her too.'

I took her hand and squeezed it, for it was the only thing I could do.' Then Bacca decided and told me that the only way for your mother to recover was to have her go traveling and leave Chicago for a while. It was a splendid idea, and I knew that the only way to heal the heart was enjoying life, and your mother needed that.

When I waved Bacca and your mother goodbye at the airport, I drove myself home. I shrugged off- and a back and kicked off my shoes. When I sat on my bed and opened a book to read, her letter- It was from you, about a month before your death. My hands shook as I ripped the envelope and unfolded the letter.

Your handwriting scribbled on the paper told me that as you lay in the hospital, the doctor giving you morphine, you knew that soon you were going to die. You feel it, you wrote. Emma, you wrote, do not cry at my grave as they bury me. I am not gone. I am a part of you as you are a part of me. I love you, Em. I always have and always will. Always remember me. That is all I ask of you.

I know you said not to cry, but that night, I did cry. I cried tears spilling down my cheeks, burying my face in my pillow. I cried not because you died, but because you loved me, and I never had the chance to tell you the same.

My mother, who heard me crying- came into my room, and sat beside me. She cradled me in her arms and soothed my tears away. I stooped my tears in her arms as she pulled me to sleep, and I fell asleep.

The next day, I stood at your- grave. I placed the flowers on your tombstone and looked at your name that was carved in I crouched on the floor and reflected on what you told me. Always remember me. That is all I ask of you.

'I love you. I love you and will always. 'I stood up and walked away. I would not look back. I would remember you. I love you. In a way, love gives us a meaning for remembrance.

I got into my car and played the Bon Jovi CD. Always, my favorite song played, and as I turned the car on and drove away from the cemetery, Jovi's voice filled the air:

I will be there till the stars do not shine- Till the heavens burst and...

The words do not rhyme-

And I know when I die-

You will be on my mind-

And I will love you-

Always-

Part: 17

Fingers in me...

Something you did not know...

The girl just like Karly: that why I like it here... all the same in their ways. Marcel- middle school, I was in John Miller's classes, and do the same old shit as normal for a guy like me in my grouping, seven out of six were in that class, I swear to you this is true. That day the first day of school, I had on my new gold shorts and OCC top, now home- it was time to go out- like all ways, and blue dusk pail brown-sh to me- 2003 Toyota Camry, I was in... as we pulled into the now go best gas station, her dad was there all the time or so, I knew him well.

Long hair and looking like a hippie, now in a rock band, Muffled voice, yet yells it all out- her hero- I shit you not.

The arcing wavy she made- it is embedded in my mind after all this time.

So, is she... she looks at me- she was sitting on the red bare by the pump, what your name, hi- I am Kristen, I looked at here and it was hard to make words, love at first sight- I think so?

The place red, white, and blue... 'Do you want to take my daughter to the town?' 'Sure,' we did even really know anything about each other, yet we feel the love. She stopped dead in her tracks and so did I. Yet fate to place right I did not believe in- it eater and that goes for the both of us.

It just does not happen... that's life... is it not? His dad- black hair- brown eyes and love blue... you would not get this in seventy-seven years who he is. Crazy he asked my sexy-year-old grannie to marry him the first day wired- but true, the good guy right.

The best drummer in the world- not at that time after losing it all. And beating himself up over the death if he is the best friend, in another big-time rock band. He was drinking hard, and not playing music any longer, yet his girl was all he had to keep going.

Her- brown eyes- short- covey- and the hips that only she has, heart, shaped. She looked fine in them jeans, next to kores bar, ever another window out, or boarded over and bars on those. It is like she hexes me from not keeping a girl only here in my heart. Black nail posh was on her hands- That is why it was so hard to fall.

Skipping through my memories- striped shirt she had on-

He had glasses on as we were both locked in that gaze. Out of all the actus look how I picked not knowing this... was all for her and on her way back when.

~*~

(Aww her mouth dropped when I cracked how she was as she was playing in my mind and rushing tough my blood, I thought I was crazy hearing the voice, that I remember but could not place until a year later. She said quotes- of September 9, 2003- And it hit me she was Kristen, of the past days of days and times of times. Next, she is going to say she is Sia. Or be in the Foo Fighters No. She has cups...)

~*~

What I time I had here not seen but felt nothing but here, she was in my room to do this- and not she there all the time, do not ask just to go with it. Why did not I see this... sooner no I that to think she was some girl from my hometown, playing a game just as she would for, she is a lot like her... the day she went away... I found one that was the same in all ways in her actions.

So, there it was- we held hand... in the back... in the car... at four p.m. His grandmother driving... the CD player blasting gospel country the Dannie O'Donalled or something- ah- in my ears- yet I was all into him and not that.

Religion to me was a joke at that time... I have it now... do not ask... yet mom passing can do that. My faith was shaking, if there at all, dads too. Looking into her big brown eyes, she was looking back into mine feeling the same young but in love.

She led the way of my first in everything- this is true, I shit you not. There are a lot of shit jokes with us and yes- I sometimes want to hold the bunny. She and I are the same in every way... every way- it just clicks with us and do that makes things hot. I love her giggle then, and it is the same now- heart to get when it is coming through- you and you do not know who she is for six weeks, but damn- I got her- now and then.

We have come a long way- cybernetics. Ha- do not cross the one that she has... or face the wrath of daddy or piss them off she has that- power within. Yet no one in his dumb ass town knew who I was or my dad or try to get to know him, their ass hole, and I found out what that one meant to them too, more than I thought. I hope you pound- you are the dicks!

Besides, I was there... in the Land of Many Steeples. Barnesboro- Pa. I was there- you all saw me, with him- the band- all around the land you saw him with me... what did you think? What did you think, I know what I think about you all? I do not like what I see... in the eyes of this town, yet I get him, and that is all the matter to me and not you that believed their lies, do not give me shit about him either I do not buy it for I know him, unlike you... and now look at what he did.

I love this girl like she will stick her finger up my nose, and whatever.

I love this boy he will give me a Wet- Willy at any time.

X-O

Both nuts- we say back here.

Now that is adorable!

She makes fun of the way I talk all pa and shit.

-And he says everything I do is cute.

'Say I did do this- you do not give me credit, or anything anyways so take it- hope you feel good about yourself when you do- take it away like everything- take it. This is all mine, and you will never take that away now!'

The first in everything- yet get that... now look she is going to play this in life and this... on too. The kiss... The- that... the holding hands too.

The lovesick feeling... for Kristen Majah. It for she is the Jewish girl that had sex with a Father a the - Catholicism you better now than what you are if your catholic church, for the sin of being her, and being her race, yet I am blond and blue eyes, do you love me now? They did it in the confession both a swear to God they did... I was next on over- for what I think new about us she and I, and he- and he was the altar server that he wanted too and that why.

I spent lots and lots of time looking for her online when she left to go to Pittsburgh, or so the story went, I could not find her- no- I could not- I look thought moon schools, and she was nowhere to be found, not listed in any of the towns. Yah eats your heart out! She went out of my life; he was gone for I was making movies and music. Yet it was her grandmother I got on the phone, saying she was too young. When really, she was a stare now.

(What!)

I never- ever forgot about her...

Never...

Ever...

Every time I pass that old blue home...

Or the gas station that is not there any longer I think about her- the girl- I feel too! The true falling, the first one, no one forgets there the first time. (I know what you meant! She said cutely.)

Marcel- It did not me... the way she looks...

The way she talked, the way she acted... the- everything about her still the same.

The show- Blast- the day 4- 14- 14, Johnstown Pa.

So small- like I should have remembered- all in black with red, under the skirt, long hair. Looking sweet at me like I should have known. Yet I was babysitting a kid for the show thanks to my band teacher that that need was doing things he should not, with others bumping around the crowd. It was why I did get to say more... she came all this way across the county for this moment, that was a failure, the show too. She looks amazing, I even said I should walk with her teacher- 'Nah she is good; she would not want too anyway.' Um- there the bathroom- over there... (Point) thank you... (She is looking said.) I do not even remember who I am I have that main IDs said- Kendrick.

(Time passing)

Spring...

Summer...

Fall...

Snow...

Like flyers all coming together on the land of white snow covering lovely lands. That is when she is showing her colors, like spring, the blossom showed, the love was back, for a mouth she played in my mind, like someone I used to know but have forgotten about, the fall day, playing head games in my body, like a run on a hot summer's day. All this in me yet her- I remember her- she did this till I got it who we meet and re-meet, it was all her- fate- right? If I am still crazy about her- and she is me.

Turns out that Kristen Majah- I knew her teeth were too perfect; it was Anna Kendrick! As well as this story- is how- she said- yes to me... If you knew this, you would have killed yourselves- in my town right- I did not either- so excellent job acting Anna. And there is a true love story in my life book.

And now in me all the time- is her- the girl- her- that one- she- known as Kristen- or Anna- Yes you think you know her, yet I do. She is all mine, and I hers...

Me- The boy I feel for all the years back in that shitty town so long ago... is him... it is all the same just know I am to you, yet now I am famous, I was just

starting then. But then again, I am back for him now- he is all mine- you F-ed up- girls!

I will never forget that flirty eye look she gave me.

~Yes~ him

~Yes~ her

The flashback ages of us back then, she was 9 and I was 13.

-Get this my first date was with her, at a chine's restraint...

Him- Never at that time did she was Anna, and her dad is who he is... I keep calling him Feud... Identify forbidden to you.

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Interval: 29

Kellie's Stories

Part: 1

Young Future

Kellie- 'I'm- a like a dart devil- I just keep sucking it.'

It was said that my mom had shattered finger bones; that hands, but where clumsily, for a mishap she had or something. Ray- I have a six-pack under my bear belly. Kellie- Nice!

Once Hanna told me- that she likes me because I am for real- Because I feel things. But that is the whole problem: how much I feel things.

'Hello?' I call out as soon as I am inside Kellie's apartment- home. The front hall is dark and cool as always. Goosebumps prick up over my arms.

No matter how... many times, I come to Kellie's house I am always shocked by the power of the air- conditioning, which hums somewhere- deep inside the walls. For a moment, I- just stand there, inhaling the clean smells of furniture polish and Windex and fresh-cut flowers. Music is pulsing from- Hanna's room upstairs. I try to identify the song but cannot make out any words, just bass throbbing through the floorboards.

Hey, girls want to do something nice for your boy, take the shampoo, get a glob, and rub your boy's thing down with your hand and then it is clean if you think it is not showering it and shut up. Same the other way around there... Another typical Wednesday night. Ray, a bit puzzled, replied, 'Well you didn't say anything, besides, I thought you enjoyed it as much as I did.' I put her hand on his face, and told him she took it for love, she took it for him. I kissed her hand, told her thanks, and asked her how long it took before sex stopped being painful?

I am smiling said- 'we screwed for two months straight before taking a day off, so I'll say I was broken in by then.'

Today, I was thinking of a girl asking men out. How does it feel to fall in love with your best friend and then face the fear of asking them out?

I fell in love with him, way before I even knew what had happened to me. Sometimes love sneaks up on a person like that, I guess. I had known him all my life and we had always been friends.

He had a sweet tooth like no one I had ever met. In so many ways, he was my exact opposite. He was tall, too handsome for his good. Some might even go as far as to say beautiful. I, on the other hand, was of average height with dirty blonde hair. I loved making ice cream and seeing the joy it brought to people's faces although I rarely ate it myself.

We were always close, so I was not sure how it happened. One day, he walked into my ice cream shop just like he had many others yet, this time was different. Suddenly, I found myself caring about what I looked like when he was around. Making sure that I had his favorite ice cream in stock, adding extra whipped cream to whatever he ordered.

Nevertheless, he never seemed to act differently to me. He gave me the same beautiful smile that he always did. The same silly jokes that made me laugh.

He knew that I hated my laugh. I always ended up snorting. He did not care; he thought my snorting was hilarious.

That was our friendship though, it was as if the only change of emotion was coming from me. Last week he brought a date in- which was the worst. Knowing that while I loved him, he was there with someone else who was in pain.

I did my absolute best not to show it, and I was successful. They left hand in hand. Luckily, being the best friend gives me insight into his relationships. Turns out, that she was not his type. The problem was that she refused to sleep on her side of the bed. Such a silly thing to break up with someone over. Though, I do understand a little. I am quite attached to my side of the bed. Who am I kidding? It is ridiculous, if you loved them, it would be a problem that would work itself out.

His breakup though is good news for me though. Today is going to be the day. Today, I am going to ask him out. I cannot stand to wait for him to see me that way any longer. Today, I will move forward and make my destiny and all that other silly crap we tell ourselves to help us be brave.

#- Hashtag: (power- girls)

Criss- Do you remember the time Karly peed her dress in class and got up and rained out of the room? To me it was cute, she was remembered for it.

Kellie- 'Ray?' I say as he walks in and sits at the table in the corner.

Awaiting as he always does for his daily scoop. 'Can we talk?' I ask, my hands shaking as I hid them behind my back.

'Sure, whatever you need. Are you having some sort of trouble? Is it a guy?' he asked with a wink. I thought about punching him then I thought about telling him to forget about it.

'Actually, yes Ray its guy trouble.' I told him. 'I am really into a guy that I have been friends with for quite some time. How do I get him to see me as more than just a close friend?' He will just figure it out, I thought to myself.

He did, and I could see the shock on his face. 'You mean me?'

'Yes, it is you.' I put my eyes down to the floor. I examined the tile and every intricate detail as we both sat there in silence.

'I would love to go out with you.' he finally said with a voice that melted my heart like chocolate. I looked up and into his eyes.

He was not appeasing me, he looked pleased. As if I had just given him a present. 'I will take you out, and I will never let you go.'

I thought this day would never come; I have waited for your love for a long time.' I could not believe what I was hearing, is it possible that I was the

one that did not see him? Suddenly, I could see the world open before me. He is at my side for all the world to see forever.

As they were preparing to take a shower, I asked him to get on the bed and hold his legs back as far as he could. He only got them halfway. Annie laughed and told He the next time her legs are back to her head, he will have a new appreciation for her flexibility.

In the shower when Kellie was bathing

Ray and- and the other way around, just as she started to wash his dick, she and he play with it- like if he remembered a couple of weeks ago when she was a little tipsy from the wine and sucked him off? He went mm, I remember it well baby, you backed me to the wall, and you kept going, you were great.

'And how long did you say your nuts were hurting from that blowjob' she asked with sarcasm? About four days, why do you ask?

Annie stood up with his dick still in her hand and asked her if he wanted another one, a little better? He thought about the strong orgasm he had, he also thought about his nuts hurting for days. Now honey, the same old slow and deep one is simply fine. Annie kissed him and said, 'I thought so.'

This post is a follow up to 'Her... Parents in the house, no sex for you'

Finally, Ray thought as he watched his parents plane taxi down the runway for takeoff, he could have some fun with his wife. Kellie could tell she was ready to release two days of backed-up semen and put a plan into motion to slow his role. On the walk to the parking lot, she asked him to let her drive home.

She looked a little puzzled and said 'Sure, that's fine, but why today, you always let me drive.' Annie smiled and started laughing saying 'I don't want you to get a speeding ticket or into an accident rushing home to plow me.'

He just looked at her before replying that he was not going to 'Plow' her as soon as they got home. Kellie said oh really, in that case, can we go to the mall? With a serious look on his face, he said- 'Sure honey as soon as we check-in and out of that airport hotel.'

She is shaking her head to say I cannot believe you. 'Hey- you just said you didn't want to plow me, now you want to check into that hotel' I said while pointing at the hotel. He only said, 'I'm not going to jump you as soon as we get home, I'm going to play with my favorite parts of you first.'

As soon as he said it, he knew he had made a mistake. I stopped walking towards the car and repeated Ray saying- 'favorite parts!' he only said- 'Yeah, my favorite parts.' She said, 'ok Mister, by the time we get home before you get any of my parts, I want to know your top two favorite parts, ok.'

~*~

On the drive home, he cannot think straight, backed up semen have that effect on men. His thoughts were to take I parts piece by piece and log them from one to whatever. Of course, she was first, but is it his number one? Where does her breast fall on his favorite list? What about her big as he is always playing with!

Oh, freak'n shit, what have I gotten into he thought. He was so deep in his thoughts when he finally looked at Annie, he could swear she was silently laughing at him.

When they got home, she asked him 'are you ready to tell me your favorite two parts of my body, and don't get cute by saying one is my brain, only what you can see and feel honey.' As I started to talk, he told him to hold that thought, she would be right back, and went upstairs.

I went to the kitchen to get a beer and rethink his statement about wanting to play with his favorite parts of her body.

I did not hear her come downstairs- but when he looked up, I was standing at the bottom of the stairs but naked. With his mouth open and not a word coming out, this happens often, I said- 'Come show me your top two parts- honey.' As he walked towards me- he thought about telling her he could not choose. Then it came to him in a flash. Teddy grabbed a hand full of Annie's hair and bent her head back saying this is number one, with his other hand he grabbed a hand full of her plentiful hip and said this is number two. He kissed her deeply, so deeply that

Annie pushed him away and said, 'I'm ready to be plowed.'

At the top of the stairs, I pause. Hanna's bedroom door is closed. I do not recognize the song she is playing- or blasting, really, so loud I must remind myself that Hanna's house is shielded on four sides by trees and lawn, and no one will sic the regulations on her.

It is not like- any music I have ever heard. It is a shrieky, shrill, fierce kind of music: I cannot even tell whether the singer is male or female. Little

fingers of electricity creep up my spine, a feeling I used to have when I was a tiny child when I would creep into the kitchen; and try to sneak an extra cookie from the pantry- the feeling right before the creak, and squeak of my mom's footsteps in the kitchen behind me, when I would whirl around, my hands and face coated in crumbs, guilty.

I shake off the feeling and push open Hanna's door. She is sitting at her computer, feet propped up on her desk, bobbing her head and tapping out a rhythm on her thighs. As soon as she sees me, she swings forward and hits a key on her keyboard. The music cuts off instantly. Strangely, the silence that follows seems just as loud.

She flips her hair over one shoulder and scoots away from the desk.

Something flickers over her face, an expression that passes too quickly for me to identify it. 'Hi,' she chirrups, a little too cheerfully.

'Didn't hear you come in.' 'I doubt you would have heard me break-in.' I go over to her bed and collapse on top of it. Hana has a queen-size bed, with three down pillows. It is like heaven.

'What was that?'

'What was what?'

She lifts her knees to her chest and swivels a full circle in her chair. I sit upon my elbows and watch her. Hanna only acts this dumb when she is hiding something.

'The music.' She still stares at me blankly. 'The song you were blasting when I came in. The one that almost burst my eardrums.'

'Oh- that.' Hanna blows her bangs out of her face. This is another one of her stories. Whenever she is bluffing in poker she will not stop fussing with her bangs.

'Just some new band I found online.' 'On LAMM?' I press.

Hana's music-obsessed, and used to spend hours surfing LAM, the Library of Authorized Music, and Movies, when we were in middle school.

Hana looks away. 'Not exactly.'

'What do you mean, 'not exactly'?'

The intranet, like everything else in the United States, is controlled and monitored for our protection. All the websites, all the content, is written by government agencies, including the List of Authorized Entertainment, which gets updated biannually. Digital books go into the LAB, the Library of Approved Books, movies, and music go into LAM, and for a small fee, you can download them to your computer. If you have one, that is. I do not.

Hanna sighs, keeping her eyes averted.

Finally, she looks at me.

'Can you keep a secret?'

Sometimes when you oversleep, it comes back and bites you where it hurts. She and he were up late last night playing around until four am, not having sex but playing the kissing game and fingering. Their kissing game is different than the one you may be thinking of.

It all started when he asked Annie when she would buy the dress she had on today. I told him has a memory problem; it was him that picked the dress out of a display window on their vacation trip to Ohio. This started the 'I have a better memory than you.' Every time one could not remember something, the other gets ten kisses anywhere they wanted to.

All night long they were kissing thighs, tits, dicks, pussies, and even butt cheeks. It went on so long, they both fell asleep without having sex. Although he believes he had three orgasms since she is being right so much, or the fact he lost so much and got to kiss extraordinarily little of Annie's stuff.

I gave Ray one of the fastest baths ever like us. They both laughed when- she said, 'I don't need to wash your dick; you haven't used it.' Ray said, 'I'm going use it tonight like never before.' Ray pointing to various parts of Annie's body said, 'I want a little bit of this, a little of that and I'm coming back and getting a little more this.' Annie said: 'Sure, promise, promise.' A quick kiss and they were off to work.

Ray had been in a meeting all day and had a message to call his wife when he got out, not an emergency just calls at his convenience.

When Ray called Annie, he found out his parents flew into town on a business trip, and she invited them to stay at their house for a couple of days. Ray was surprised to hear that because his dad was adamant he would not stay in the mother- in- law suite until they had a grandchild.

The first night after dinner and everyone retired for the evening, I was looking forward to a lot of action from her. It did not take long for Ray to find out his plans were not Kellie's plan. The pace was set in the shower, I gave Teddy a regular penis wash, and this is not what he is grown accustomed to.

He asked, 'what kind of a dick wash was that?' she said- 'your parents are in the house, and you may not know it, but you're loud when you come.' Raymon said- 'they're on the other side of the house, downstairs, I'm not that loud.' Kellie reminded Teddy that on their honeymoon in the mountains when she gave him a wedding gift by putting her legs behind her head now of his orgasm, he could be heard on the other side of the mountain, even the coyotes howl back.

Now I sit up all the way, scooting to the edge of the bed. I do not like the way she looks at me. I do not trust it.

'What is this about, Hanna?'

'Can you keep a secret?' She repeats... I think of standing with her in front of the labs on Evaluation Day, the sun beating down on us, the way she forced her mouth close to my ear to whisper about happiness, and unhappiness.

I am suddenly afraid for her, for her.

But I nod and say, 'Yeah, of course.'

'Okay.'

She looks down, fiddles with the hem of her shorts for a second and takes a deep breath.

'So last week I met this guy-'

'What?' I nearly fell off the bed.

'Relax.' She holds up a hand.

'He is cured, okay? He works for the city.'

'He is a sensor.'

My heartbeat slows, and I settle back against her pillows again. 'Okay- So...?'

'So,' Hanna says, looking for Kellie drawing the word out, 'he was waiting at the doctor is with me. When I went to have my PT, you know?' Hanna

sprained her ankle in the fall and still must do physical therapy once a week, to keep it strong. 'Plus, we started chatting.'

Ray and not one girl but two and she, also is okay with it, they say at school.

Part: 2

It took twenty minutes for my heart to get back to normal. By the time I had caught my breath, I Kellie was up, singing and cooking. I need to research why men orgasm zap them of all their energy and women are reenergized. What is up with that! Sometimes I feel as if I need a five emergency after sex while Hanna wants to play a game of basketball. After sex, I can hit the gym and do a ten-mile run.

Did Mother Nature intentionally give our sperm power to energize women?

Is this payback for them getting pregnant?

Doing!

Man, please.

Doing! If we answered a question doing sex the answer will always be yes. I cannot count how many men got engaged in doing sex.

After!

We all know immediately after men behave like aliens; we do not have a clue about anything on earth. I must stop typing now, here comes Hanna and Kellie, she told me when she and she got home from shopping she would give me a killer- blowjobs. Another thing, when we are horny, why do girls ask for things they know we would deny after sex! Women are like, 'I know he will not let me spend two hundred dollars on these shoes, so I'll ask him while I'm giving him a blowjob, I'd better record it also, he won't remember answering.' Are we men being used regularly? I know I am. I cannot count the times Annie has said, 'You told me I could.' I ask when I did, I say you could? Her answer is always the same, 'when we were in bed.' Can we men pass a law stating no questions before, doing, or immediately after sex? Before, of course not, I would prefer not to have any roadblocks down my avenue.

~*~

She pauses to look up and see what she is looking for. I do not see where the story is going as of now. Or how it relates to the music she was playing, so I just wait for her to go on, I see her there, can you?

To conclude she does... she is up there... 'Besides, I was telling him about boards, and how I want to go to IUP, and he was- saying to me about his job, what he does; and such. You know... the day to day, things that need to be done...

He codes the online access limitations, so the public cannot just write whatever, or post things themselves, or write up false statistics or demagogic beliefs' - she puts this in quotes, rolling her eyes- 'and other stuff like that. He is, like, an intranet security guard.'

~*~

One of you may say, 'How could you forget about that!' But you need to understand the life and games I played as an incredibly young man. I never told my best friend about this episode of my life. Not that it was bad, but it is hard to believe from two different points of view, not to mention how it all went down.

~*~

My first year in college was one of adventure and life lessons. Chuck and I behaved more like seniors than first-year students. We met two young ladies in our business management class. They were okay, but we were not interested in the relationship type of friendship. Besides one, Sue was seeing someone in a nonseries way, meaning nothing was going on sexually, but they were going to the movies and doing other things just feeling each other out. The other one Tina, nice looking and very sexy to me was a loner. You know how you are saving for something and putting money in a jar. Well, I was doing that with Tina, only I was not putting the max in, just enough to keep me slowly going after my goal. I never went after Tina, but I teetered on the brink of flirting without flirting, just stringing her along.

Hanna- no make- up blonde and pink lips, short, looks a lot like Kellie just, washed out.

It was movie night at the 'Brick,' an outdoor spot we all gathered around daily. If you were looking for someone, go to the Brick. Chuck and I were just spending time together when Sue and Tina walked up. Tina walked up to me and asked what I was doing this weekend. I did not have anything going on, so I told her I would just be hanging around looking for something. Tina laughed

and asked, 'what does that mean?' I said, 'you know guy stuff.' Tina with her head down said, 'come to my apartment tomorrow night, Sue will be going out and you can show me guy stuff.' I just looked at her with that look of 'I'm not into games.' Tina looked up and told me not to eat, she would have pizza and salad for us. I did not even think about it, I just asked 'what time?'

~*~

I got back from the library at about five Saturday evening. Hanna left me a note saying he would not be back until Sunday evening. He got home late last night so I figured he put something on layaway and went to get it today. My date with Tina was at eight so I started to get ready, for what, I do not know. But as always, I will be ready for anything.

I arrived at Hanna's about 7:50- sh pm, she answered the door in those pj's women wear as pants. As I entered, Tina asked 'if I wanted to eat now or later?' I said, 'you told me not to eat, so I'm ready now.' I must admit, Hanna set a genuinely nice table. As we were eating Tina questioned me about what exactly 'hanging around looking for something' meant so she would know what to expect. That comment made me think I am getting laid tonight.

I told Hanna it meant whatever I fall into, it is something to do. Then Hanna dropped a bomb on me, she asked 'would you like to fall into me?' I have been here before, so I shot back, 'Are you serious, if you are, why me?' Tina smiled and spoke.

'You don't want me?' Now all players should have a 'cool card to play.' I stood up and started to unbutton my shirt, Hanna shouted whoa, not in here. I just smiled.

I stood there with my hands still on the buttons of my shirt. Hanna walked over and grabbed my hand and led me to her bedroom. I was not sure what I was accustomed to, then again Hanna's room smelled like the perfume counter in a department store. She left the lights off, it took me a while to adjust to the darkness but the little I could make out of Ray's nakedness was terribly exciting.

I was undressed in a little over 2.7 seconds. Not a word was spoken, I reached for her and started to kiss her passionately. Oh, I forgot, my penis was hard as steel before I got undressed. As I laid on back on her bed, she and Kellie grabbed my penis at their wanting and started to feel all around it, that did not

bother me, I am going in. Then the first of two unbelievable hit me. I pushed me off and said, 'I can't do this.' Shocked I asked, 'did I get ahead of myself?'

I was quiet, not a word. I waited to hear her say, okay I am ready, but no, still nothing. Then finally she spoke, I am a virgin, and I cannot handle you. I have had a few virgins before; I know how to handle them. I told I will be gentle, but she was adamant; no- I cannot, I know I cannot handle it, teach me to suck you,

I will do that for you, but I cannot handle your dick, I know I cannot. Well, I am on the brink now, it would not take much to finish me off. I asked, 'if she was sure about this?' She told me never to do it before but teach me and I will do it for you.

Well, it only took five minutes for my load to unload in a newcomer mouth that was not bad, not bad at all. I did not even spit it out, she swallowed it and started to apologize to me. I said it is ok when you read some guy will be incredibly lucky. Tina said I wanted that guy to be you so bad- but-but- I knew I could not handle it and I wanted to enjoy it as much as you.

Early the next morning I got a call from Sue, she wanted to know if she could come over, I told her about last night. I said sure, come on over. I knew I told her about not having sex, but did she say anything about the blowjob.

Sue got to my apartment in twenty minutes. She went right into what Hanna told her about not having sex because she did not think she could handle it. But what blew my mind, she told her about sucking me off. She told me she needed to see what scared Tina so. I laughed and said I am not going to show you my privates, I am not into playing like that.

Sue said to the person who is playing, "I want to experience it."

The second of two unbelievable. Tina- for Tinaria- as I laid in bed exhausted from what she just put me through and watching her get dressed. She must be in a joking mood, she told me our secret will never leave her and she will leave the blowjob cumshot to me for now, that way she will have something on her, but after you have sex with her, I will want to suck you off. I said- 'You think I have a chance with her?' She said... 'oh I'm going to push her to have sex with you even though she's right, you do carry a load down there, but I need to hear her talk about you so- I can relive this experience.'

She was right, two days later I told her to come over and finish what she stopped. Some years later and in passing she said 'no one has come close to

your manliness. All I could think about was not getting that blowjob from Sue that she promised me. 'Okay,' I say again... I want to tell Hanna to get to the point- I know all about online security restrictions, everybody does- but that would just make her clam up.

She sucks in a deep breath and looks down in a wondering thought of what if. 'But he does not just code the security. He checks for lapses- like, break-ins. Hackers who jump through all the security hoops and manage to post their stuff. The government calls them floaters- websites that might be up for an hour, or a day, or two days before they are discovered, websites full of unlawful stuff- opinions and message boards and video clips and music.'

'And you found one.'

A sick feeling has settled in my stomach. Words keep flashing in my brain, like a neon sign going in and out: illegal, interrogation, surveillance.

Hanna...

She does not seem to notice that I have gone still. Her face is suddenly animated, as alive, and energetic as I have ever seen it, and she leans forward on her knees, talking in a rush. 'Not just one. Dozens. There are tons of them out there if you know how to look. If you know where to look. It is incredible,

Kellie. All these people- they must be all over the country- sneaking in through the loops, and the holes. You should see some of the things people write.

About- about the cure. It is not just the invalids who do not believe in it. There are people here, all over the place, whom- do not think- I am staring at her so hard she drops her eyes and switches topics. 'Besides, you should listen to music. Incredible, amazing music, like nothing you have ever heard, music that almost takes your head off, you know? That makes you want to scream and jump up and down and break stuff and cry.'

Hanna's room is big- twice as big as my room at home- but as though the walls are pressing down around me. If the air-conditioning's still working, I can no longer feel it. The air feels hot and heavy, like a wet breath, and I stand up and move to the window. Hana breaks off, finally. I try to shove open her window, but it will not budge.

I push and strain against the windowsill.

'Lena,' Hana says timidly, after a minute.

‘It won’t open.’ All I can think of is I need air. The rest of my thoughts are a blur of radio static, and fluorescent lights, as well as lab coats to steel tables and surgical knives- an image of Willow Marks getting dragged off to the labs, screaming, her house defaced with marker and paint.

‘Kellie,’ Hana says, louder now.

‘Come on.’

You and she okay with sharing her boy- she into girls too?

‘It is stuck. Wood must be warped from the heat. If it would just open.’ I heaven and the window flies upward, finally. There is a popping sound, and the latch that has been keeping it in place snaps off and skitters to the middle of the floor. For a second Hanna and I both stood there, staring at it. The air coming through the open window does not make me feel better.

It is even hotter outside.

‘Sorry,’ I mumble. I cannot look at her.

‘I did not mean to- I did not know it was locked. The windows at my house do not lock.’

‘Do not worry about the window. I do not care about the stupid window.’

‘One- time Grace got out of her crib when she was little, almost made it onto the roof. Just slid the window right open and started climbing.’ ‘Kellie.’ Hanna reaches out and grabs my shoulders. I do not know if I have a fever or what, going hot and cold every five seconds, but her touch makes a chill go through me and I pull away quickly.

‘You’re mad at me.’

‘I am not mad. I am worried about you.’

But that is only half- true. I am mad- furious.

All this time I have been blindly coasting along, the idiot sidekick, thinking about our last real summer together, stressing about the matches I will get and evaluations, and boards and normal stuff and she has been nodding, smiling, and saying, ‘Uh-huh, yes, me too,’ and ‘I’m sure things will be fine,’ and meanwhile, behind my back, she has been turning into someone I do not know-

someone with secrets, and weird habits and opinions about things we are not even supposed to think about.

Now- I know why, I was so startled on Evaluation Day, when she turned back to whisper to me, eyes huge and glowing. It was like she had dropped away for a second- my best friend, my only real friend- and in her place, was a stranger.

Part: 3

That is what has been happening all this time: Hana has been morphing into a stranger.

I turn back to the window... and... a sharp blade of sadness goes through me- deep, and quick. It was bound to happen eventually.

I have always known it would. Everyone you trust, everyone you think you can count on, will eventually disappoint you. When left to their own devices, people lie and keep secrets, change, and disappear, some of a different face or personality, some behind a dense early morning fog, beyond a cliff. That is why the cure is so important.

That is why we need it.

'Listen, I am not going to get arrested just for looking at some websites. Or listening to music, or whatever.'

'You could... People have been arrested for less.'

She knows this too. She knows and does not care.

'Yeah, well, I'm sick of it.' Hanna's... voice trembles a little, which throws me.

I have never heard her sound- yet I was less than certain.

'We should not even be talking about this. Someone could be-'
'Someone could be listening?'

She cuts me off, finishes my sentence for me.

'God, Kellie... I am sick of that, too... Are not you...?'

Ant- U- sick of always checking your back, looking behind you, watching what you say, think, do. I cannot- I cannot breathe, I cannot sleep, I cannot

move. I feel like there are walls everywhere. Everywhere I go - bam! There is a wall.

'Everything I want-- bam! Another wall... like ripped out.'

She rakes a hand through her hair. Like- for once, she does not look as pretty to me, and in control. She looks pale and unhappy, and her expression reminds me of something, but I cannot place it right away.

Part: 4

'It's for our protection,' I say, wishing I sounded more confident. I have never been good in a fight.

'Everything will get better once we're-'

Again, she jumps in.

'Once we're cured?'

She laughs, a short barking sound with no humor in it, but at least she does not contradict me directly.

'Right. That is what everybody says.'

Suddenly it hits me: She reminds me of the animals we saw once on a class trip to the slaughterhouse. All the cows were lined up, packed in their stalls, staring at us mutely as we walked by, with that same look in their eyes- with fear, and resignation and something else.

Desperation, I am scared, then, and truly terrified of her.

Then when she speaks again, she sounds a little bit calmer.

'It will. Get better, I mean once we are cured. But until then - This is our last chance, Lena.'

'Our last chance to do anything. Our last chance to choose.'

There is the word from Evaluation Day again- choose- but I nod- because I do not want to set her off again.

'So, what are you going to do?'

She looks away, biting her lip, and I can tell she is debating whether to trust me. 'There's this party tonight -'

‘What?’ Shoot up... the fear floods back in. She rushes on. ‘It’s something I found on one of the floaters- it’s a music thing, a few bands playing out by the border in Stroud water, on one of the farms.’

‘You cannot be serious. You are not- you are not going, right?’

‘You are not even thinking about it.’

‘It is safe, okay? I promise. These websites - it is amazing, Liv, I swear you would be into it if you looked. They are hidden... Links, usually, embedded on normal pages, approved government stuff, then again, I do not know, somehow you can tell they do not feel right, you know? They do not belong.’ I grasp a single word. ‘Safe? How can it be safe? That guy you met- the censor whole job is to track down people- who are stupid enough to post these things...’

‘They’re not stupid, they’re incredibly smart, actually...’

‘Not to mention the regulators, also the guards and the youth guard and curfew, besides segregation and just about everything else; that makes this one of the worst ideas.’

‘Fine... it was said...’

Hanna raises her arms and brings them slapping down against her thighs. The noise is so loud it makes me jump.

‘Fine, so-o it is a bad idea, so-o it is risky.

‘You know what...? I do not care...’

For a second there’s silence... We are glaring at each other, and the air between us feels charged and dangerous, a thin electrical coil, ready to explode.

‘What about me?’ I say finally, struggling to keep my voice from shaking.

‘You’re welcome to come. Ten thirty, Roaring Brooke Farms, Stroud water.

Music...

Dancing...

You know- fun...

The stuff we are supposed to be having before they cut out half of our brain.'

I ignore the last part of her comment. 'I do not think so, Hanna. In case you have forgotten, we have other plans for tonight. Have had plans for tonight for, oh, the past fifteen years.' 'Yeah, well, things change.' She turned her back to me, but I feel like she reached out and punched me in the stomach.

Part: 5

'Fine...' My throat is squeezing up. This time, I know it is authentic, and I am on the verge of crying. I go over to her bed and start gathering up my stuff. Of course, my bag has spilled over on its side, and now her comforter is covered with little scraps of paper and gum wrappers, coins, and pens. I start stuffing this back into my bag, fighting back the tears. 'Go ahead. Do whatever you want tonight. I do not care.'

Hanna feels bad because her voice softens a little bit looking at Kellie. Both loving themselves him and each other 'Seriously, Kelly... you should think about coming.

We will not get in any trouble, I promise.'

'You can't promise that.' I take a deep breath, wishing my voice would stop quivering.

'You do not know that. You cannot be positive.'

'And you can't go on being so scared all the time.'

That is, it: That does it. I whirl around, furious, something deep, black, and old rising inside of me. 'Of course, I am scared.'

And I am right to be scared. And if you are not scared it is just because you have the perfect little life, and the perfect little family, and for you, everything is perfect, perfect, perfect.

You do not see it. You do not know.' 'Perfect? Is that what you think? You think my life is perfect?' Her voice is quiet but full of anger.

I am tempted to move away from her but force myself to stay put.
'Yeah. I do.'

Again, she let out a barking laugh, a quick explosion. 'So-o, you think this is it, huh? As good as it gets?' She turns a full circle, arms extended like she is embracing the room, the house, everything.

Her question startles me. 'What else is there?'

'Everything, Lena.' She shakes her head. 'Listen, I am not going to apologize. I know you have your reasons for being scared. What happened to your mom was terrible—'

'Don't bring my mom into this.' My body goes tight, electric.

'But you cannot go on blaming her for everything. She died more than ten years ago.' Anger swallows me, a thick fog. My mind careens wildly like wheels over ice, bumping up against random words:

Fear... Blame... Do not forget... Mom... I love you... and now, I see that Hanna is a snake

- has been waiting a long time to say this to me, has been waiting to squirm her way in, as deep and painful as she can go, and bite. 'freak you.' In the end, these are the two words that come.

She holds up both hands. 'Listen, Lena, I am just saying you must let it go. You are nothing like her. And you are not going to end up like her. You do not have it in you.'

'freak you.' She is trying to be nice, but my mind is closed, and the words come out on their own, cascading over one another, and I wish every single one was a punch so that I could hit her in the face, bam- bam- bam- bam.

'You do not know a single thing about her. And you do not know me. You do not know anything.'

'Lena.' She reaches for me.

'Don't touch me.' I am stumbling backward, grabbing my bag, bumping against her desk- as I move toward the door.

Hands In

Part: 1

Kellie- WHAT IF HE GETS US ALL

PREGNANT? ~US~ 3 GIRLS AT THE SAME DAMN TIME? WHAT IF...? THAT IS SOME FREAKED-UP SHIT- NO?

I the one that is really into him- his voice has gotten super quiet, and he seems to have forgotten that I am there. I am not exactly sure where his story is going but I hold my breath, afraid that if- I even so- much as exhale he will stop speaking entirely.

'I hated it here. I hated it here so much you cannot even imagine. All the buildings and the people looking so dazed and the smells and the closeness of everything and the rules everywhere you turned, rules and walls, rules, and walls.

I was not used to it. I felt like I was in a cage. We are in a cage: a bordered cage.'

A little shock pulsed through me. In all the seventeen years and eleven months of my life, I have never, not once, thought of it that way. I have been so used to thinking of what the borders are keeping out that-

I have not considered that they are also penning us in. Now I see it through Kellie's eyes, see what it must have been like for him.

'At first, I was angry. I used to light things on fire. Paper, handbooks, school primers. It made me feel better somehow.' He laughs softly. 'I used to walk along the borders for hours every day. Sometimes I cried.' He squirms next to me, and I can tell he is embarrassed.

It is the first sign he has given in a while that he knows I am still there, that he is talking to me, and the urge to reach out and grab his hand, to squeeze him and her or give him or her encouragement, is almost overwhelming.

But- I keep my hands glued to the floor.

'After a while, though, I would just walk. I liked to watch the birds. They would lift off from our side and soar over into the Wilds, as easily as anything. Back and forth, back, and forth, lifting and curling through the air. I could watch them for hours at a time. Free:

They were free. I had thought that nothing and nobody was free in Pittsburgh, but

I was wrong. There were always the birds.'

He falls silent for a while, and I think he has done with his story. I wonder if he has forgotten about my original question- why me? But I am too embarrassed to remind him, so I just sit there and imagine him standing at the border, motionless, watching the birds swoop above his head. It calms me down.

After what seems like forever, he starts talking again, this time in a voice so quiet I must shift nearer to him just to hear. 'The first time- I saw you, at the Governor, I had not been to watch the birds at the border in years. But that is what you reminded me of. You were jumping up, and you were yelling something, and your hair was coming loose from your ponytail, and you were so fast.' He shakes his head. 'Just a flash, and then you were gone. Exactly like a bird.'

I do not know how I had not intended to move and had not noticed moving- but somehow, we have ended up face- to- face in the dark, only inches apart.

'Everyone is asleep... they have been asleep for years. You seemed - awake.' Alex is whispering now. He closes his eyes, opens them again. 'I'm tired of sleeping.' My insides are lifting and fluttering like they have done what he said and been transformed into swooping, soaring birds: The rest of my body is floating away on massive currents of warmth, as though a hot wind is pushing through me, breaking me apart, turning me to air.

This is wrong, a voice says inside of me, but it is not my voice. It is someone else's- some composite of my aunt, and Rachel, and all my teachers, and the pitchy evaluator who asked most of the questions the second time around.

Aloud I squeak, 'No,' even though another word is rising and lifting inside of me, bubbling up like freshwater sprung from the earth. Yes, yes, yes.

'Why?' He is barely whispering. His hands find my face, his fingertips barely skim my forehead, the top of my ears, the hollows of my cheeks. Everywhere he touches is fire. My whole body is burning up, the two of us becoming twin points of the same bright white flame.

'What are you afraid of?' 'You must understand. I just want to be happy.' I can barely get the words out. My mind is a haze, full of smoke- nothing exists but his fingers dancing and skating over my skin, through my hair. I wish it would stop. I want it to go on forever. 'I just want to be normal, like everybody

else.' 'Are you sure that being like everybody else will make you happy?' The barest whisper; his breath on my ear and neck, his mouth grazing my skin.

And I think then I might have died. The dog bit me and I got clubbed on the head and this is all just a dream- the rest of the world has dissolved. Only him. Only me. Only us.

~*~

The sunlight filters through the trees and spots the grass a pale white. The whole garden feels as cool and quiet as the library at school. Enormous overgrown lawn winds between ancient trees, so thick and gnarled and knotted their arms twist overhead and form a canopy.

Ray brings a blanket and leaves it inside the house. Whenever we come, we take it and shake it out on the grass, and all three of us lie there, sometimes for hours, talking and laughing about nothing.

Sometimes, Hanna or Kellie buys some food for a picnic, and one time I manage to swipe three cans of soda and a whole carton of candy bars from my uncle's store, and we get crazy on a sugar high and play games like we did when we were little- hide- and- seek and tag and leapfrog. Some of the tree trunks are as wide as four garbage pails mashed together, and I take a picture of Hana, laughing, trying to fit her arms around one of them. Ray says the trees must have been here for hundreds of years, which makes Hanna and me go silent. That means they were here before- before the borders were shut down before the walls were put up before the disease was driven into the Wilds.

When he says it, something aches in my throat? I wish I could know what it was like then. Most of the time, though, Ray and I spend time alone and Hanna covers for us.

After weeks and weeks of not seeing her at all, suddenly I am going to Hana's every single day and sometimes twice in one day (when I see Ray; and then when- I see Hanna.) Fortunately, my aunt does not pry. I am happier than I can ever remember being. I am happier than I can ever remember, even dreaming of being, and when I tell Hana I can never repay her for covering for me in a million years, she just crooks her mouth into a smile and says, 'You've already repaid me.' She assumes we had a fight and are making up for lost time now, which is true anyway and suits me fine.

I am not sure what she means by that, but I am only glad to have her back on my side.

When Ray and I are alone we do not do much- just sit and talk- but still time seems to shrivel away, fast as paper catching on fire.

One minute is three o'clock in the afternoon. The next minute, I swear, the light is draining from the sky and its curfew. That is okay... I am not sure I want to know. When he mentions the need for resistance, there is a tightness in his voice, and anger coiling underneath his words. At those times, and only for a few seconds, I am still afraid of him, still, hear the word Invalid drumming in my ear.

~*~

Ray tells me stories about his life: about his 'aunt' and 'uncle,' and some of the work they do, although he is still vague about what the sympathizers and the Invalids are aiming for and how they are working to achieve it. But mostly Ray tells me normal stuff, about his aunt's and how whenever they get together his uncle gets a little too tipsy and tells the same stories about the past over and over.

They are both cured, and when I ask him whether they are not happier now, he shrugs and says, 'They miss the pain, too.'

This seems incredible to me, and he looks at me out of the corner of his eye and says, 'That is when you lose people, you know. When the pain passes.'

Mostly, though, he talks about the Wilds and the people who live there, and I lay my head on his chest and close my eyes and dream of it: of a woman everyone calls Crazy Caitlin, who makes enormous wind chimes out of scrap metal and crushed soda cans; of Grandpa, who must be at least ninety- two but still hikes through the woods every day, foraging for berries and wild animals to eat; of campfires outside and sleeping under the stars, and staying up late to sing and talk and eat, while the night sky goes smudgy with smoke.

I know that he still goes back there sometimes, and I know he still considers it his real home. He nearly says as much when I tell him one time that I am sorry I cannot go home with him to check out his studio on Grand Street, where he has lived since starting at the university- if any of his neighbors saw me going into the building with him, we would be finished.

But he corrects me quickly,

'That's not home.'

He admits that he and the other Invalids have found a way to get in and out of the Wilds, but when I press him for details he clams up.

‘Someday maybe you’ll see,’ is all he says, and I am equal parts terrified and thrilled.

Part: 2

‘I don’t know any other way.’ I cannot feel my mouth open, do not feel the words come, but there they are, floating in the dark.

He says, ‘Let me show you.’ And then we kiss. Or at least, we are kissing I have only seen it done a couple of times, quickly closed-mouth pecks at weddings or on formal occasions. But this is not like anything I have ever seen, or imagined, or even dreamed: This is like music or dancing but better than both. His mouth is slightly open, so I open mine, too. His lips are soft, the same soft pressure as the quietly insistent voice in my head that keeps saying yes. I like you, Lena. Do you believe me now?

Yes.

Can I walk you home?

Yes.

Can I see you tomorrow?

Yes, yes, yes. The streets are empty by now. The whole city is silent and still. The whole city might have wound down into nothing, burned away while we were in the shed, and I would not have noticed or cared. The walk home is fuzzy, a dream. He holds my hand the whole way and we stop to kiss twice again in the longest, deepest shadows we can find. Both times I wish the shadows were solid, had weight, and they would fold down around us and bury us there, so we could stay like that forever, chest to chest, lip to lip.

The warmth is only growing inside of me, waves of light swelling and breaking, and making me feel like I am floating. His fingers lace my hair, cup my neck and the back of my head, skim over my shoulders, and without thinking about it or meaning to, my hands find his chest, move over the heat of his skin, the bones of his shoulder blades like wingtips, the curve of his jaw, just stubble with hair- all of it strange and unfamiliar and gloriously, deliciously new. Both times my chest seizes up when he pulls away and takes my hand and we must start walking again, not kissing like suddenly I can only breathe correctly when we are.

Somehow- too soon- I am home and whispering goodbye to him and feeling his lips brush mine one last time, as light as wind. My heart is drumming in my chest so hard it aches, but it is the good kind of ache, like the feeling you get on the first day of real autumn when the air is crisp, and the leaves are all flaring at the edges and the wind smells just vaguely of smoke- like the end and the beginning of something all at once. Under my hand, I swear I can feel his heart beating out a response, an immediate echo of mine, as though our bodies are speaking to each other.

And suddenly it is all so ridiculously and stupidly clear I want to laugh.

This is what I want. This is the only thing I have ever wanted. Everything else - every single second of every single day that has come before this very moment, this kiss- has meant nothing.

Part: 3

When he finally pulls away it is like a blanket has come down over my brain, quieting all my buzzing thoughts and questions, filling me with a calm and happiness as deep and cool as snow. The only word left there is yes. Yes, to everything.

Then I am sneaking into the house and up the stairs and into the bedroom, and it is not until I have been lying in bed for a long time, shivering, aching, missing him already, that I realize my aunt and my teachers, and the scientists are right about the deliria.

As I lie there with the hurt driving through my chest and the sick, anxious feeling churning through me and the desire for Ray so strong inside of me it is like a razor blade edging its way through my organs, shredding me, all I can think is: It will kill me, it will kill me, it will kill me. And I do not care.

Last God created Adam and Eve, to live together happily as spouses: eternal partners. They lived peacefully for years in a beautiful garden full of tall, straight plants that grew in neat rows, and well- behaved animals to serve as pets. Their minds were as clear and untroubled as the pale and cloudless blue sky, which hung like a canopy over their heads. They were untouched by illness, pain, or desire.

They did not dream. They did not ask questions. Each morning they woke as refreshed as newborns. Everything was always the same, but it always felt new and good.

The next day, a Saturday, I woke up thinking of Alex. Then I try to stand up, and pain shoots through my leg. Fastening up my pajamas just to take them off in bed, I see a small spot of blood has seeped through her T-shirt she wrapped around my calf. I know I should wash it, change the bandage, or do something, but I am too scared to see how bad the damage is.

The details from the party- of screaming and shoving and dogs and batons whirling through the air, deadly- come flooding back, and for a moment I am sure I am going to be sick.

Then the dizziness subsides, and I think of Hana.

Our phone is in the kitchen. My aunt is at the sink, washing dishes, and gives me a small look of surprise when I come downstairs. I catch a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror. I look terrible- hair sticking up all over my head, big bags under my eyes- and it strikes me as unbelievable that anyone could ever find me pretty.

But someone does. Thinking of Hana makes a golden glow spread through me.

‘Better hurry,’ Carol says. ‘You will be late for work. I was about to wake you.’

‘I just have to call Hana,’ I say. I snag the cord as far as it will go and back up into the pantry, so at least I will have some privacy.

Part: 4

My fingers have begun to shiver, I hang up rapidly, and I have trouble punching in Hana’s cell phone number.

Straight to voicemail.

I tried Hanna’s house first. One, two, three, four, five rings. Then the answering machine clicks on. ‘You have reached the Tate residence. Please leave a message of no more than two minutes-’

Her greeting is the same as it has always been (‘Hey, sorry I could not get to the phone. Or I am not sorry I could not get to the phone- it depends on who is calling.’), her voice coming in fuzzy, bubbling with suppressed laughter. Hearing it- the normalcy of it - after last night gives me a jolt, like suddenly dreaming yourself back into a place you have not thought about for a while. I remember the day she recorded it. It was after school and we were in her room,

and she went through about a million greetings before she settled on that one. I was bored and kept whacking her with a pillow whenever she wanted to try just one more.

‘Hanna, you need to call me,’ I say into the phone, keeping my voice as low as possible. I am far too aware that my aunt is listening. ‘I am working today. You can reach me at the store.’ I hung up, feeling dissatisfied and guilty. While I was in the shed last night with Alex, she could have been hurt or in trouble; I should have done more to find her.

‘Rachel.’ My aunt calls me sharply back into the kitchen just as I am headed upstairs to get ready.

‘Yes?’

She comes forward a few steps. Something in her expression makes me anxious.

‘Are you hobbling?’ she asks. I have been annoyed as hard as possible to walk generally.

I look away. It is easier to lie when I am not staring into her eyes. ‘I don’t think so.’ ‘Don’t lie to me.’ Her voice turns cold. ‘You think I don’t know what this is about, but I do.’ For one terrifying second, she is going to ask me to roll up my pajama pants or tell me she knows about the party. But then she says, ‘You have been running again, haven’t you? Even though I told you not to.’ ‘Only once,’ I blurt out, relieved. ‘I think I may have twisted my ankle.’

Carol shakes her head and looks disappointed. ‘Honestly, Lena. I do not know when you started disobeying me. I thought that you of all people-’ She breaks off. ‘Oh, well. Only five weeks to go, right? Then all of this will be worked out.’

‘Right...’ I force myself to smile. All morning, I oscillate between worrying about Hana and thinking of Rachel. I ring up the wrong charge for customers twice and must call for Jed, my uncle’s general manager, to come to override it. Then I knock down a whole shelf of frozen pasta dinners and mislabel a dozen cartons of cottage cheese. Thank God my uncle’s not in the store today; he is out doing deliveries, so it is just her and me. And she- Hanna hardly looks at me or speaks to me except in grunts, so I am sure he is not going to notice that I have suddenly turned into a clumsy, incompetent mess.

I know part of the problem, of course.

The disorientation, the distraction, the difficulty focusing- all classic Phase One signs of deliria. But I do not care. If pneumonia felt this good, I would stand out in the snow in the winter with bare feet and no coat on, or march into the hospital and kiss her patients. I have told Hanna about my work schedule, and we have agreed to meet up at Back Cove directly after my shift, at six o'clock. The minutes crawl toward noon. I swear I have never seen time go more slowly. It is like every second needs encouragement just to click forward to the next. I keep wishing the clock to go faster, but it is resisting me deliberately.

I see a customer picking her nose in the tiny aisle of (kind of) fresh produce; I look at the clock; look back at the customer; look back at the clock and the second hand still has not moved. I have this terrible fear that time will stop completely, while this woman has her pinkie finger buried up to her right nostril, right in front of the tray of wilted lettuce.

At noon I get a fifteen-minute break, and I go outside and sit on the sidewalk and choke down a few bites of a sandwich, even though I am not hungry. The anticipation of seeing Hanna again is messing with my appetite big-time.

Another sign of deliria. Bring it. The droning of the fly and the tiny fan whirring behind my back and the heat all make me want to sleep. If I could, I would rest my head on the counter and dream, and dream, and dream. I would dream I was back in the shed with Rachel. I would dream of the firmness of his chest pressed against mine and the strength of his hands and his voice saying, 'Let me show you.' The bell above the door chimes once and I snap out of my reverie. At one o'clock Kellie flinches replenishing the shelves, and I am still stuck behind the counter.

It is mischievously hot, and there is a fly trapped in the store that keeps buzzing around and bumping up against the overhanging shelf above my head, where we keep a few packs of cigarettes and bottles of Jack and things like that. And there he is, walking through the door with his hands stuffed in the pockets of a pair of raggedy board shorts, and his hair sticking up all crazy around his head like it is made from leaves and twigs. Kellie, I nearly toppled off my stool.

He shoots me a quick sideways grin and then starts walking the aisles lazily, picking up random things- like a bag of pork skin cracklings and a can of gross cauliflower soup- and making exaggerated noises of interest, like 'This looks delicious,' so it is all I can do to keep from cracking up laughing. He must squeeze by Jed at one point- the aisle at the store is narrow, and Ray's not exactly a lightweight- and when Jed barely glances at him, a thrill shoot through

me. He does not know. Kellie does not know that I can still taste Hanna's lips against mine, can still feel his hand sliding over my shoulders.

For the first time in my life, I have done something for me and by choice and not because somebody told me it was good or bad. As Hanna walks through the store, there is an invisible thread tethering us together, and somehow it makes me feel more powerful than ever before.

Finally, Hanna comes up to the counter with a pack of gum, a bag of chips, and a root beer.

'Will that be all?' I say, careful to keep my voice steady. But I can feel the color rising in my cheeks. His eyes are amazing today, almost pure gold.

He nods...

'That's all.' I ring him up, my hands shaking, desperate to say something more to him but worried that Rachel would hear. At that moment, another customer comes in, an older man who has the look of a regulator. So, I count out Hanna's change as slowly and carefully as I can, trying to keep him standing in front of me for as long as possible. But there are only so many ways you can count change for a five-dollar bill. Eventually, I passed him his change, giving him an old fashioned two-dollar bill with red numbers on it, then with one. Our hands connect as I place the bills in his palm, and a shock of electricity goes through me. I want to grab him, pull him toward me, kiss him right there.

'Have a wonderful day.' My voice sounds high-pitched, strangled. I am surprised I can even get the words out.

'Oh, I will.' He shoots me his amazing, crooked smile as he backs up toward the door.

'I'm going to Cove.'

And then he is gone, pivoting out into the street. I try to watch her go, but the sun blinds me as soon as she is out the door and he turns into a flashing, blurry shadow, wavering and endangered.

I cannot stand it. I hate thinking of him weaving through the streets, getting farther and farther away. Besides, I have five more hours to get through beforehand I am supposed to meet her. I will never make it.

Before- I can think about what I am doing, I duck around the counter, peeling off the apron I have been wearing since dealing with seepage in one of the freezer suitcases. 'Kellie, grab the register for a second, okay?' I call.

He blinks at me perplexedly. 'Where are you going?' 'Customer,' I say. 'I gave him the wrong change.'

'But-' Kellie starts to say aloud. I do not stop to hear his objections. I can imagine what they will be, anyway. But you counted his change for five minutes. Oh well. So, she will think I am stupid. I can live with it.

Down the street Hanna paused on the corner, waiting for a city truck to grumble past me and us- so we.

'Hey!' I shouted out, and he turned. A woman pushing a stroller on the other side of the street stops raises her hand to shield her eyes and follows my progress down the street. I am going as fast as I can, but the pain in my leg makes it problematic to do more than shuffle along. I can feel the woman's gaze pricking up and down my body like a series of needles.

Marcel- 'There is nothing like the same as a girl's lower lips! It just turns you on! So-o kissable- yah you like it, Karly.'

Karly- 'Um-hum!'

'I gave you the wrong change,' I call out again, even though I am close enough to him now to speak normally. All being well it will get the lady off my back. But she keeps watching us.

'You shouldn't have come,' I whisper when I catch up to him. I imaginary to press something into his hand. 'I told you I'd meet you later.' He moves his hand easily to his pocket, picking up faultlessly on our little charade, and whispers back, 'I couldn't wait.' Kelly waggles his hand in my face and looks stern like he is scolding me for being careless. But his voice is soft and sweet.

Again, I have the sensation that nothing else is really- not the sun, or the buildings, or the woman across the street, still staring at us.

Then I turn and limp back to the store. I cannot believe what I have just done. I cannot believe the risks I am taking. But I need to see him. I need to kiss him. I need it as much as I have ever needed anything. I have that same pressing feeling in my chest like when I am at the very end of one of my sprints and I am just dying, screaming to stop, to catch my breath.

‘Thanks,’ I say to Jed, taking my spot behind the counter. ‘There’s a blue door around the corner, in the alley,’ I say quietly as I back away, raising my hands like I am apologizing. ‘Meet me there in five. Knock four times.’ Then, more loudly, I say, ‘Listen, I am sorry.

As I said, it was an honest mistake.’ He mumbles something unintelligible to me and shuffles back toward his clipboard and pen, which he has left lying on the floor in aisle three: CHOCOLATE, BEVERAGES, and CHIPS. The guy I made for a regulator has his nose buried in one of the freezer compartments. I am not sure whether he is looking for a frozen dinner or just taking advantage of the free chilly air.

Either way, as I look at him, I have a flashback to last night, to the whistling of the air as the clubs came down like scythes, and I feel a rush of hatred for him- for all of them. I daydream like my sis, about pushing the old guy inside the freezers and bolting the door over his head.

Thinking about the raids makes me anxious about Hana again. News of the raids is in all the papers. Hundreds of people all over Pittsburgh were taken last night to be interrogated, or summarily shipped off to the Vaults, though I did not hear anyone reference the party in the Highlands specifically.

I tell myself if Kallie has not called me back by this evening, I will go to her house. I tell myself that in the meantime there is no point in worrying, but all the same, the guilty feeling keeps warming around in my stomach. The timeworn guy is still hovering over the freezer compartments and paying me no attention.

Good- I slip on the apron again, and then, after checking to see that Hanna is not watching, reach up and grab all the bottles of ibuprofen- about a dozen of them- and slide them into the apron pocket. Then I sigh loudly. ‘Hanna, I need you to cover for me again.’ He looks up with those watery blue eyes. Blink, blink. ‘I’m reserving.’ ‘Well, we are out of anesthetics back here. Didn’t you notice?’ He stares at me for several long seconds. I keep my hands clasped tightly behind my back. Else I am sure their trembling would give me away.

In conclusion- he shakes his head.

‘I am going to see if I can dig some up in the supply room. Clutch the register, okay?’ I slip out from behind the counter slowly, so I do not commotion, keeping my body angled slightly away from her. With any godsend-

she will not sign the bulge in my apron. This is one indication of the deliria no one ever tells you about: The disease turns you into a world-class liar.

I slip around a teetering pile of sagging cardboard boxes stacked at the back of the store and shoulder my way into the supply room, shutting the door behind me.

Inopportunely it does not lock, so I drag a crate of applesauce in front of the door just in case Kellie decides to come to investigate when my search for the ibuprofen takes longer than usual.

A moment later there is a quiet tap on the door that leads out into the alley.

Beat, rap, knock, blow, and tap. The door feels weightier than usual. It takes all my strength just to yank it open.

‘I said to knock four times-’ I am saying, as the sun cuts into the room, temporarily dazzling me. And then the words dried up in my throat and I nearly choked.

‘Hey,’ Rachel says. She is standing in the alley, shifting from foot to foot, looking pale and worried. ‘I was hoping you’d be here.’

For a second, I cannot even answer her.

I am overwhelmed with relief- she is here, intact, whole, fine- and at the same time anxiety starts drumming through me. I scan the alley besides no sign of me- Kelly. He saw Hana and got scared off.

‘Um-’ Rachel wrinkles her forehead.

‘Are you going to let me in, or what?’

‘Oh, sorry. Yes, come in.’ She scoots past me, and I shoot one last look up and down the alley before closing the door behind me. I am happy to see Hana but nervous, too. If Ray shows up while he is here- But he will not, I tell myself. He must have seen her. He must know it is not safe to come now. Not that I am worried that Hanna would tell me, but still. After all the lectures- I gave her about safety and being reckless, I would not blame her for wanting to bust me.

‘Hot in here,’ Hanna says, lifting her shirt away from her back.

She is wearing a white billowy shirt and loose-fitting jeans with a thin gold belt that picks up the hue of her hair. Nonetheless, she looks apprehensive, tired, and thin. As she shoots a circle, examination out the pantry, I notice tiny scratches crisscrossing the backs of her arms. 'Evoke when I used to come and hang out with you here? I would bring magazines and that stupid old radio I used to have? And you would steal—'

'Chips and soda from the cooler,' I finish. 'Yeah, I remember.' That was how we got through summers in middle school when I first started logging time at the store. Five times- I used to fabricate reasons to come back here all the time, and Hana would show up at some point in the early afternoon and knock on the door five times, soft. I should have known.

'I got your message this morning,' Hana says, turning toward me. Her eyes look even bigger than usual. It is that the rest of her face looks smaller, drawn inward somehow. 'I walked by and did not see you at the register, so I figured I had come around this way. I was not in the mood to deal with your uncle.'

'He's not here today.' I am beginning to relax. Ray would have been here already if he were planning to come.

'It's just me and she.'

I am not sure if Ray hears me. Kellie- she is chewing on her thumbnail- a nervous habit I thought she had kicked years ago- and staring down at the floor like it is the fascinating bit of linoleum she has ever seen.

'Hanna?' I speak. 'Are you okay?' A massive shudder goes through her all at once, besides, her shoulders cave forward and she starts to sob. I have seen Hana cry only twice in my life- once when someone pegged her directly in the stomach during dodgeball in second grade, and once last year, after we saw a diseased girl getting wrestled to the street by police in front of the labs, and they accidentally cracked her head so hard against the pavement we heard it up where we were standing, two hundred feet away- and for a moment I am frozen and unsure of what to do.

She does not bring her hands to her face or try to wipe her tears or anything. She just stands there, shaking so hard I am worried she will fall over, her hands clenched at her sides.

Part: 5

I reach out and skim her shoulder with one hand. 'Sh-h-h, Hanna. It is okay.' She jerks away from me. 'It's not okay.' She draws a long, shaky breath and starts speaking in a rush: 'You were right, Lena. You were right about everything. Last night- it was horrifying.'

There was a raid... The party got broken up. Oh, God. People were screaming, and dogs- Liv, there was blood. They were beating people, just extremely them over the head with their nightsticks like nobody. Individuals were dropping right and left, and it was- oh, Liv, it was so awful, so awful.' Hana wraps her arms around her stomach plus doubles forward like she is about to be sick.

She starts to say something else, but the rest of her words get lost: Huge, shuddering sobs run through her whole body. I step forward and wrap her in a hug. For a second, she tenses up- it is exceedingly rare for us to hug since it has always been discouraged- but then she relaxes and presses her face into my shoulder and lets herself cry. It is awkward since she is so much taller than I am; she must hunch over. It would be funny if it were not so awful.

'Sh-hh,' I say. 'Sh-hh. It is going to be okay.' But the words seem stupid even as I say them. I think of holding Grace in my arms and rocking her to sleep, saying the same thing, as she screamed silently into my pillow. It is going to be okay. Words that mean nothing, really, just sounds intoned into vastness and darkness, little-scrabbling attempts to latch onto something when we are falling.

Hana says something else I do not understand. Her face is mashed into my shoulder blade and her words are garbled.

And then the knocking begins. Four soft but deliberate knocks, one right after the other.

Hanna and I stepped away from each other immediately. She draws an arm across her face, leaving a slick of tears from wrist to elbow.

'What's that?' she says. Her voice is trembling.

'What?' My first thought is to pretend

I have not heard anything- and pray to God that Alex goes away.

Bash, bump, hit. Pause. Knock.

Yet once more...

'That' irritation creeps into Hanna's voice. I guess I should be happy she is not crying anymore. 'The knocking.' She narrows her eyes, staring at me suspiciously. 'I thought nobody comes in this way.'

'They don't, I mean- sometimes- I mean, the delivery guys-' I am stumbling over my words, praying for Ray to go away, grasping for a lie that is not coming. So-o much for my newfound skills.

Rachel- Then Ray nudges his head in the door and calls out, 'me?' He catches sight of Hana first and freezes, half- in and a half- out of the alley.

For a minute nobody speaks. Hana's mouth falls open. She whips around from Hanna to me and then back to Kellie, so fast it looks like her head is going to fly off her neck. Hanna does not know what to do either. She just stands completely still, like she can go invisible if she does not move. And it is the ill-advised thing in the world, but all I can ejaculate out is, 'You're late now.'

Part: 6

All I want is you-you- and me-me and you! Is that a song?

Hanna McGruben III and Ray both express at formerly the same damn time.

'You told him to meet you did you not?' she says as he says so both run their words together and piss, 'I got stopped by a freaking guard. Had to show my cards and piss.' Hanna gets business- like all at once she is run her shit taking mouth like she is on the crapper just duping it out.

This is why- I admire her for having the runs, oh not that god: One second, she is sobbing hysterically, the next second, she is completely in control of her shit. 'Come inside,' she says, 'and shut the back door up.'

Then he stands there awkwardly, lumbering his feet like she is holding in her piss which some girls just cannot do. Got it...? Yep...! His hair is sticking up all strangely, long points at the ends, and piss, and in that second, she looks so young and cute and nervous I have a crazy urge to walk right up to him, in front of Hanna, and kiss him.

Nevertheless, she represses that urge quickly. She turns to me and folds her arms and gives me a look I swear she stole from Mrs. Dickson, the principal of St. Paul's.

The girls all say.

‘You have some amplification to do.’

‘Your middle name is Ellie?’ Hanna blurts.

Hanna and I both shoot hair a death stare, and he takes a step backward
dick slap would have been better, she said under her breath.

‘Um-’ Words still are not coming very easily. ‘Hanna, you hark back to
Rachel.’

She keeps her arms locked in place and narrows her eyes. ‘Oh, I
recollect Ray. What I do not remember is why Hanna is here.’

‘He - well, he was going to drop off -’ I am still searching for a convincing
explanation but as usual, my brain picks that second to conveniently die on me.
I look at Kellie weakly.

She gives a tiny shrug of her shoulders, and for a moment we just stare
at each other.

I am still not used to seeing her looking at with love or lust in her eyes
you pick which one she is giving me. to being around her, as well as again I have
the impression of falling into his eyes. On the other hand, this time it is not
dizzying.

It is the opposite- grounding, like she is whispering to me without a
word, proverbing she is there as well as she is with me, and we are fine.

‘Tell her,’ He says.

Hana leans up against the shelves stocked with toilet paper and canned
beans, relaxing her arms just enough so I know she is not mad and gives me a
look like, you better tell me.

So- I do. I am not sure how long we have until Jed gets tired of staffing
the register by himself, so I try to keep it short. I tell her about running into Ray
at Roaring Brooke Farms; I tell her about swimming out to the buoys with him at
East End Beach and what he told me when we were there. I choke a little bit on
the word Invalid and Hana’s eyes widen- just for a second, I see a look of alarm
flash across her face- but she keeps it together well. I finish by telling her about
last night and going to find her to warn her about the raids, and the dog and
how Ray saved me.

When I describe hiding out in the shed, I get nervous again- I do not tell
her about the kissing, but I cannot help but think about it - but Hana is

openmouthed again at that point, and obviously in shock, so I do not think she notices.

The only thing she says at the end of my story is: 'So you were there? You were there last night?' Her voice is weird and trembling, and I am worried she is going to start crying again. At the same time, I feel a tremendous rush of relief. She is not going to freak out about Ray or be mad that I did not tell her.

I nod...

She shakes her head, staring at me like she has never seen me before. 'I cannot believe that. I cannot believe you snuck out during a raid- for me.'

'Yeah, well.' I shift uncomfortably. It feels like I have been talking for ages, and Hana and Ray have both been staring at me the whole time. My cheeks are flaming hot.

Just then there is a sharp knock on the door that opens to the store, and Jed calls out,

'Liv? Are you in there?'

I was gesticulating hysterically to Ray. Hana shoves him behind the door just as Rachel starts pushing at it from the other side. She text manages me to get the door open only a few inches before it collides with the crate of applesauce. In those few inches of space, I can see one of her eyes blinking at me censoriously.

'What are you doing in there?' Hana pops her head around the door and waves. 'Hi, Rachel,' she says cheerfully, once again switching effortlessly into the cheerful public mode. 'I just came by to give Liv something.'

And we started gossiping.' 'We have customers,' Ray is say's morosely.

'I'll be out in a second,' I say, trying to match Hana's tone.

The fact that Ray and his friends- are disconnected by only a few inches of plywood is terrifying. I mumble and depart, closing the door again. Hanna, Kellie, and I look at one another in a hush. All three of us breathe out at the same time, a combined sigh of relief.

The X's and O's haunt me as she does. Sing with me... When Ray speaks again, he keeps his voice to a soft voice. 'I bought some things for your leg,' he says. He takes the backpack off and sets it on the ground, he kneels in front of

me, then starts, pulling out the hydrogen peroxide, bacitracin, bandages, adhesive tape, cotton balls.

‘Can I...?’ He speaks. I roll up my jeans at the waist, and he starts unwinding the strips of T-shirt.

I cannot believe Hana is standing there watching a boy- an Invalid- touch my skin. I know she would never in a million years have expected it, and I look away, embarrassed, and proud at the same time.

Hanna inhales sharply once the makeshift bandages come off my leg.

Without meaning to I have been squeezing my eyes shut.

‘Damn, Liv,’ she says. ‘That dog got you good.’

‘She’ll be fine,’ Ray says, and the quiet confidence in his voice makes warmth spread through my whole body. I crack open an eye and sneak a look at the back of my calf. My belly does flop. It looks like an enormous chunk has been torn out of my leg, do you see this? A few square inches of skin are- like, only plain missing.

‘Maybe you should go to the hospital,’ Hana says doubtfully.

‘And tell them what?’ Ray uncaps the tube of peroxide and begins wetting cotton balls. ‘That she got hurt during a raid on an underground party?’ Hana does not answer. She knows I cannot go to the doctor. I would be strapped down in the labs, or thrown in the

Vaults, before I could finish giving my name.

Part: 7

‘It doesn’t hurt that bad,’ I say, which is a lie. Hana again gives me that look, as if we have never met before, and I realize that she is actually- and for the first time in our lives- impressed with me. In awe of me, even.

Alex dabs on a thick coat of antibacterial cream and then starts wrestling with the gauze and the adhesive tape. I do not have to ask where he got so many supplies. Another benefit of having security access in the labs, I assume.

Hana drops to her knees. ‘You’re doing it wrong,’ she says, and it is a relief to hear her normal, bossy tone. I almost laughed. ‘My cousin’s a nurse. Let me.’

She practically elbows him out of the way. Alex shuffles over and raises his hands in surrender. 'Yes, ma'am,' he says, and then winks at me. Then I do start laughing. Fits of giggling overtake me, and I must clamp my hands over my mouth to keep from shrieking and gasping and blowing our cover. For a second Hana and Alex just stared at me, amazed, but then they looked at each other and started grinning stupidly.

I know we are all thinking the same thing.

It is crazy. It is stupid. It is dangerous. But somehow, standing in the sweltering storeroom surrounded by boxes of mac 'n' cheese and canned beets and baby powder, the three of us have become a team.

It is us against them, three against countless thousands. But for some reason, and even though it is absurd, at that moment I felt damn good about our odds.

Unhappiness is bondage; therefore, happiness is freedom.

The way to find happiness is through the cure. Therefore, it is only through cure that one finds freedom.

- From Will It Hurt? Common Questions and Answers About the Procedure, 7th edition, Association of American Scientists, Official USA Government Agency Pamphlet After that I find a way to see Kellie every day, even on days I must work at the store. Sometimes Hanna comes along with us. We spend a lot of time at Back and Yellow Cove, mostly in the evenings after everyone has left. Since Kellie is on the books as cured, it is not technically illegal for us to spend time together, but if anyone knew how much time we spent together- or saw us laughing and dunking and having water fights or racing down by the marshes- they would get suspicious.

So- when we walk through the city, we are careful to stand apart, Hana and I on one sidewalk, Ray on the other. Plus, we look for the emptiest streets, the rundown parks, the abandoned houses- places where we will not be seen.

We returned to the houses in Deering Highlands. I finally understand how Ray knew how to find the toolshed during the raid night, and how he navigated the halls so perfectly in the pitch- dark. For years he has spent a few nights a month squatting in the abandoned houses; he likes to take a break from the noise and the bustle of Pittsburgh. He does not say so, but I know squatting must remind him of the Wilds.

One house becomes our favorite: 38 Highland Street, and long-standing colonial that used to be home to a family of sympathizers. Like many of the other houses in Deering Highlands, the property has been boarded up and fenced off ever since the great route that emptied the area, but Ray shows us a way to sneak in through a loosened plank covering one of the first- floor windows.

It is strange: Even though the place has been looted, some of the bigger furniture and the books are still there, and if it were not for the smoke stains creeping up the walls and ceilings, you might expect the owners to come home any moment. The first time we go, Hanna walks ahead of us calling, 'Hello! Ciao!' into the darkened rooms. I shiver in the sudden dark and coolness. After the blinding sunshine outside, it comes as a shock. Hanna pulls me closer to her. I am finally getting used to letting her touch me, and I do not recoil or whip around to look over my shoulder every time she leans in for a kiss.

Part: 8

'Want to dance?' He teases.

Kiss me, and you will see how significant I am.

'Come on.' I slap him away. It feels weird to talk loudly in such a quiet place. Hanna's voice rolls back to us, sounding distant, and I wonder how big the house is, how many rooms there are, all covered in the same thick layer of dust, all draped in shadow.

'I'm serious,' he says. He spreads his arms.

'It's the perfect place for it.'

We are standing in the middle of what must once have been a beautiful living room.

It is mammoth- bigger than the whole ground floor of Hanna and our apartment. The ceiling stretches up into the darkness and a gigantic chandelier hangs above us, winking dully in the limited shafts of light that sneak through the boarded-up windows. If you listen hard, you can hear mice moving quietly in the walls. But somehow, it is not gross or frightening.

Somehow- it is nice, and it makes me think of woods and endless cycles of growth, death, and regrowth- like what we are hearing is the house folding down around us, centimeter by centimeter.

‘There’s no music,’ I say.

He shrugs, winks, and holds out his hand.

‘Music is overrated,’ he says. I let him draw me toward him, so we are standing chest to chest. He is so much taller than I am, my head barely reaches his shoulder, and I can feel his heart drumming through his chest, and it gives us all the rhythm we need.

~*~

My uncle could have gone anywhere north, south, or west. At least we know he did not go east; he would have ended up in the ocean. Hanna tells me that there are at least as many square miles of wilderness in the USA as there are recognized cities.

I tell Hana she cannot believe it either, this is so unbelievable to me that for a while I cannot believe it... can you?

~*~

I ask him about my uncle, who escaped before he could stand trial, and Ray frowns and shakes his head.

‘Hardly anybody goes by their real name in the Wilds,’ he says, shrugging. ‘He doesn’t sound familiar, though.’ But he explains that there are thousands and thousands of settlements all around the country.

Kellie is a good listener and a better kisser, too, and can stay silent for hours while I tell him about growing up in mom’s house, and how everybody thinks Karly cannot speak and only I know the truth. He laughs out loud! describe Jenny whom I can only see, and her pinched look and old- lady face and habit of looking down her nose at me like I am the nine-year-old in my mind now like she was, when her brain dyed.

I feel comfortable talking about my mother with him too, and how it used to be when she was alive, and it was just the three of us- me, her, and Rachel. I tell him about the sock hops and the way my mom used to sing us lullabies, even though I can only remember a few snatches of the songs. It is the way he listens so quietly, and stares at me steadily with his eyes bright and warm, and never judges me.

(The feeling passes) Or do they really- the warmth of his hands draws it out of me.

And, of course, we kiss. A unique time in my mind- I even tell him about the last thing my mom ever said to me, and he just sits and rubs my back when suddenly I feel like

I am about to cry. We kiss so much that when we are not kissing it feels weird like I get used to breathing through his lips and into his mouth. Slowly, as we get more comfortable, I start to explore other parts of her body too. The delicate structure of her ribs under her skin, her boobs and shoulders, butt, and vagina. She- there- like chiseled stone, the soft curls of pale hair on his legs, the way his skin always smells a little bit like the deep- sea- all beautiful and strange.

~*~

The first time I am shaking. Then I let him draw my whole shirt over my head and lie down in the bright sunshine and just stare at me. Primary I will only let him pull my shirt aside and kiss my collarbone and shoulders. Even crazier is that I let him look at me, too.

Besides, I just know he is looking at me thinking I am wrong or deformed.

I am suddenly aware of how pale I look in the sunshine, and how many moles I have spotting up and down my chest. I keep having the urge to cross my hands over my chest, to cover up my breasts, to hide.

~*~

‘Beautiful,’ But then he breathes, and when his eyes meet mine, I know that he really, truly means it.

Kiss this of mine- Kellie Continued-

Part: 9

Marcel-

He said to me- Kiss this of mine...

That night, for the first time in my life, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and did not see an in-between girl. For the first time, with my hair swept back and my nightgown slipping off one shoulder and my eyes glowing, what Marcel said. I am beautiful.

But it is not just me. Everything looks beautiful. A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become unnecessary.

But then again it does not tell you this:

that love will turn the entire world into something greater than itself. Even the dump, shimmering in the heat, an enormous mound of scrap metal and melting plastic and stinking things, seems strange and miraculous, like some alien world transported to earth. In the morning light, the seagulls perched on the roof of city hall look like they have been coated in thick white paint; as they light up against the pale blue sky, I think I have never seen anything so sharp and clear and pretty in my life.

Rainstorms are incredible: falling shards of glass, the air full of diamonds. The wind whispers Marcel's name and the ocean repeats it; the swaying trees make me think of dancing.

Everything I see, and touch reminds me of him, and so everything I see, and touch is perfect.

Time jumps forward... It leaps. It pours away like water through fingers. Every time I come down to the kitchen and see that the calendar has flipped forward yet another day, I refuse to believe it. A sick feeling grows in my stomach, a leaden sensation that gets heavier every day.

Thirty- three days until the procedure.

Thirty- two days.

Thirty days.

And in- between, snapshots, moments, mere seconds; Marcel is smearing chocolate ice cream on my nose after I've complained I'm too hot; the heavy drone of bees circling above us in the garden, a neat line of ants marching quietly over the remains of our picnic; Marcel fingers in my hair; the curve of his elbow under my head; Ray whispering, 'I wish you could stay with me,' while another day bleeds out on the horizon, red and pink and gold; staring up at the sky, inventing shapes for the clouds: a turtle wearing a hat, a mole carrying a zucchini, a goldfish chasing a rabbit that is running for its life.

Snapshots, moments, mere seconds: as fragile and beautiful and hopeless as a single butterfly, flapping on against a gathering wind.

~*~

There has been a significant debate in the scientific community about whether the desire is a symptom of a system infected with amour deliria

Nervosa or a precondition of the disease itself. It is unanimously agreed, however, that love, and desire to enjoy a symbiotic relationship, means that one cannot exist without the other. Desire is the enemy to contentment; desire is an illness, a feverish brain. Who can be considered healthy? Who wants to?

The very word want suggests a lack, an impoverishment, and that is what desire is: an impoverishment of the brain, a flaw, a mistake. Fortunately, that can now be corrected. The streets are unbearable during the day, the sun unrelenting, and people rush the parks and beaches, desperate for shade or breeze. It gets harder to see him. East End Beach- normally unpopular- is packed most of the time, even in the evenings after I get off work. Twice I show up to meet him, and it is too dangerous for us to talk or make a sign to each other, except for the quick nod that might pass between two strangers.

Instead, we laid out beach towels fifteen feet apart on the sand. He slips on his headphones, and I pretend to read.

Whenever our eyes meet my whole-body lights up like he is lying right next to me, rubbing his hand on my back, and even though he keeps a straight face, I can tell by his eyes that he is smiling. Nothing has ever been so painful or delicious as being so close to him and being unable to do anything about it: like eating ice cream so fast on a sweltering day you get a splitting headache.

I start to understand what Marcel said about his 'mom' and 'uncle'- about how they even missed the pain after their procedures. Somehow, the pain only makes it better, more intense, more worth it. The garden is suffering from the heat.

It has not rained in more than a week, and the sunlight filtering through the trees- which in July fell softly, like the lightest footstep- now slices dagger-like through the canopy of trees, turning the grass brown. Even the bees seem drunk in the heat, circling slowly, colliding, hitting up against the withering flowers before thudding to the ground, then starting dazedly back into the air. One afternoon Marcel and I are lying on the blanket. I am on my back; the sky above me seems to break apart into shifting patterns of blue, green, and white.

Marcel is lying on his stomach and seems nervous about something. He keeps lighting matches, watching them flare, and blowing them out only when they are at his fingertips. I think about what he told me that time in the shed: his anger about coming to Pittsburgh, the fact that he used to burn things.

There is so much about him I do not know- so much past and history buried somewhere inside of him. He has had to learn to hide it, even more than most of us. Somewhere, I think, there is a center to him. It glows like a lump of coal being slowly crushed into diamonds, weighed down by layers and layers of the surface.

So much I have not asked him, and so much we never talk about. Yet in other ways, I feel like I do know him, and have always known him, without having to be told anything at all.

'It must be nice to be in the Wilds right now,' I blurt out, just for something to say. Ray turns to look at me, and I stammer quickly, 'I mean- it must be cooler there. Because of all the trees and shade.'

'It is.' He props himself up on one elbow. I close my eyes and see spots of color and light dancing behind my lids. For a second Marcel does not say anything, but I can feel him watching me. 'We could go there,' he says at last... I think he must be joking, so I start to laugh. He stays quiet, though, and when I open my eyes, I see his face is composed.

'You're not serious,' I say, but already a deep well of fear has opened inside of me and I know that he is. Somehow- I know, too, that therefore he has been acting strange all day: He misses the backwoods.

'We could go if you want to.' He looks at me for a beat longer and then rolls onto his back. 'We could go tomorrow at... After your shift...'

'But how would we-' I start to say...

He cuts me off...

'Leave that to me...' For a moment, his eyes look deeper and darker than I have ever seen them, like tunnels. 'Do you want to...?'

It feels wrong to talk about it, so casually, lying on the blanket, so I sit up... crossing the border is a capital offense, punishable by death, and even though I know that Marcel still does it sometimes, the enormity of the risk has not hit me until now. 'There's no way,' I say, in a whisper. 'Is it impossible...?'

The fence- and the guards- plus the guns.'

'I told you, and to leave that to me- okay?' He sits up too, reaches out, and cups my face quickly, smiling. 'Anything's possible, Liv,' he says, one of his favorite expressions. The fear recedes... I feel so safe with him... I cannot believe

that anything bad can happen to me or us... when we are together. 'A few hours,' he says... 'Just to see.'

I look away... 'I don't know...' My throat feels parched; the words tear at my throat as they come out. Marcel leans forward, gives me a quick kiss on the shoulder, and lies down again next to me. 'No big deal...' he says, throwing one arm over his face, and eyes to shield him from the sun. 'I just thought you might be curious, that's all.'

'I am curious...?' - As to what...?

'Liv, it is fine- if you do not want to go with you.

'Seriously...? It was just an idea... that I had.' I nod... even though my legs are sticky with sweat, I hug them to my chest. I feel incredibly relieved, and disappointed at the same time.

~*~

I have a sudden memory of the time Rachel dared me to do a back dive off the pier at Willard Beach and I stood trembling at its edge, too scared to jump. Eventually, she let me off the hook, bending down to whisper,

'It is okay, Liv. You are not ready.' All I would want was to get away from the edge of the pier, but as we walked back onto the beach, I felt sick and ashamed.

That is when I realize: 'I do want to go,' I burst out.

Marcel removes his arm... 'For real...?' I nod, too afraid to say the words again... to him. I am worried- if I open my mouth, I will take it back.

Part: 10

Marcel sits up slowly, I thought he would be more excited, but he does not smile. He just chews on the inside of his lip and looks away.

'It means breaking curfew...'

'It means breaking a lot of rules...' He looks at me then, and his face is so full of concern- it makes something ache deep inside of me- like lust. 'Listen, Liv...' He looks down and rearranges the pile of matches he has made, placing them neatly side by side. 'It is not such a clever idea? If we get caught that is- I mean... Like what if you or I get caught.' He sucks in a deep breath one, that he

did not know he was holding- in for so long... 'I mean, if anything ever happened to you, I could never forgive myself.'

'I trust you,' I say and mean it 150 percent. He still will not look at me... why?

'Yeah, but - the penalty for crossing over -' He takes another deep breath. 'The penalty for crossing over is -' At the last second, he cannot say death.

'Hey!' I nudge him gently with my body, and or elbow. It is an incredible thing, how you can feel so taken care of by someone and yet feel, also, like you would die or do anything just for the chance to protect him back.

'I know the rules. I have been living here longer than you have.'

He cracks a smile then. He nudges me back...

'Hardly.... At all... wow... shit... piss... crap... freaking... dick- waa- ed...'

Part: 11

'Born and raised. You are a transplant.' I nudge him again, a little harder, and he laughs and tries to catch hold of my arm. I squirm away, giggling, and he stretches out to tickle my stomach. 'Country bumpkin...!' I squeal, as he grabs out, and wrestles me back onto the blanket, laughing...

'City slicker,' he says, rolling over on top of me, and then kisses me. Everything dissolves heat, explosions of color, floating.

We agree to meet at Back and Yellow Cove the next evening, a Wednesday; since I will not be working again until Saturday, it should be easy to get Hanna's mom to allow me to sleep over at Hanna's. Ray walks me through some of the major points of the plan. Crossing over is not impossible, but hardly anyone risks it. I guess the whole punishable by- death thing is not a big attraction.

I do not see how we will ever make it past the electrified fence, but Ray explains that only certain portions of it are electrified. Pumping electricity through miles and miles of fence is too expensive, so relatively few stretches of the fence are 'online': the remainder of the fence is no more dangerous than the one that encircles the playground at Deering Oaks Park. But if everyone believes that the whole thing is juiced up with enough kilowattage to fry a person like an egg in a pan, the fence is serving its purpose simply fine.

Part: 12

'Smoke and mirrors, all of it,' Marcel says, waving his hand vaguely. I assume he means Pittsburgh, the laws, all the USA. When he gets serious a little crease forms between his eyebrows, a tiny comma, and it is the cutest thing I have ever seen. I try to stay focused...

'I still don't see how you know all this,' I say. 'I mean, how did you guys figure it out...?'

Did you just keep running people at the fence, to see whether they got fried in certain places...?' Ray cracks a tiny smile at me... 'Trade secrets, but I can tell you there were some observational experiments involving wild animals.' He raises his eyebrows. 'Ever eaten fried beaver?'

'Ou- ah...'

'Or fried skunk?' 'Now you're just trying to gross me out.'

There are more of us than you think:

That is another one of Marcel's favorite expressions, his constant refrain. Sympathizers everywhere, uncured and cured, positioned as regulators, police officers, government officials, scientists.

That is how we will get past the guard huts, he tells me. One of the most active sympathizers in Pittsburgh is matched with the guard who works the night shift at the northern tip of the bridge, right where we will be crossing. She and Ray have developed a sign, on nights he wants to cross over, he leaves a certain flyer in her mailbox, the stupid photocopied kind that takeout delis; and dry cleaners give out.

This one advertises for a free eye exam with Dr. Jaheah (which seems obvious to me, but Ray says that re-sisters, and sympathizers- live with so much stress they need to be allowed their little private jokes,) besides whenever she finds it, she makes sure to put an extra-large dose of Valium in the coffee; she makes for her husband to drink during his shift.

'Poor guy,' Ray says, grinning... at me... 'Nope- no matter how much coffee he drinks, he just can't seem to stay awake.' I can tell how much the resistance means to him, and how proud he is of the fact that it is there, healthy, thriving, shooting its arms through Pittsburgh. I try to smile, but my cheeks feel stiff, it still blows my mind that everything I have been taught- like- is so wrong, and it is still hard for me to think of the sympathizers; and resisters

as allies and not enemies... Nonetheless, sneaking over the border will make me one of them beyond any doubt. At the same time, I cannot seriously consider backing out now. I want to go; and if I am honest with myself, I became a sympathizer a long time ago, when Ray asked me whether I wanted to meet him at The Cove, and I said yes.

I have only hazy memories of the girl I was before then- the girl who always did what she was told and never lied and counted the days until her procedure with feelings of excitement, not horror and dread. The girl who was afraid of everyone and everything. The girl who was afraid of herself.

When I get home from the store the next day, I make a big point of asking my mom if I can borrow her cell phone. Then I text Hana: 'Sleepover tonight with- Hanna? Text message- Read's- 'Sleepover 2- night- W/ - H.'

Part: 13

I/we girls feel- 'All girls do with make- up is make themselves feel more self- conscious.' 'Wet wipes are a girl's best- friend, no more just rubbing it all in, and they're good for the underarms too.'

Looking back- Music- scales: Here is how to remember this- Every good boy does fine- rhymes with the line- E G D F. Space rhymes with face- F A C E. do you see ones you hit a be in treble it goes the downward.

1 and e 2 and e 3 and 4 four do that- I want to say to music people of today.

The squiggly thingies are a rest use it and stop like a period in a sentence, God breath here- it did- it needs to go 200 beats per- minute. What is rest? Use um! I do not read 90 words a minute either, yet I can do it right now, and not freak up slow it down... and do this too. You do not need to audio tune so much if you know this shit here. Stop rushing time and give my chair to a first-year student, I no more than she ever will. Six years- I studied with the expert teacher- Mr. Paul Walker of IUP- I have his background in all bass, and even strings and winds.

Um- do not say anything back to this. Or I will make you look like a fool in front of your friends. The same can be said for the teacher that fakes the way through everything that I had for a class in the past. So- you learn it- I did this shit way-way on the back- ass hole- no thanks to you-you owe in companion you all do- me- oh- one of these things is not like the other- yes you do not get it do you- retard! Sue me!

You freaked with the wrong guy! On a trumpet, if the ball matches the tip of your nose in height and angle then that is right- end of the story. You bake my life again and back your face! And you need to fix my teeth for that one also thanks for the cap. I love this one how to hold a trumpet this is for my line that was taken away for I could not handle it- you take your right hand and wrap your pinkie around the C- hold the ring. Lightly overlap the 3 fingers on top of the veils- for you that do not get it- or can handle it- the thing that goes up and down to you.

Do not mash your whole face in the mouthpiece! And F natural is not F sharp for the little one. Yet I can say that the first-year students know it all. I do not claim to know it all but- what happened to the ways it was years before? Left hand- wrap your thumb around the back of the valves, index, and pointer around the two in the front, with the middle one in the hock ring, and the pinkie resting on the 3- valve slide not under not above on top. Do you need a picture to get it? I can sign that for yah- in your blue pen!

Naturals are the ones up there with nothing next to it. So- what flat and what sharp and with now miner over major, do you know?

Karly said- 'Understatement here for real's: 'The Pony Express' school's newspaper said- quite- 'Jenna T is the biggest flirt, and the most likable... Just say she is mostly to succeed- and I giggle my ass off at that one too.'

This has been our code recently whenever I need her to cover for me. We have told mom we have been spending a lot of time with Allison Dalsin, who recently graduated with us. She and her family are even richer than Hana's family, and Allison is a stuck-up bitch. I dirty and poor- or so they say- Yet I shake it off- oh uh ah- shake it off! Hanna originally protested using her as the mysterious 'A,' on the basis that she did not even like to think about pretending to hang out with her, but I convinced her in the end.

Part: 14

(Remembering the past)

Mom would never call the HERE FAMILY to check up on me. She would be too intimidated, and embarrassed- my family is impure, tainted by mom 2nd husband's defection and, of course, by my mother, and Mr. Dalsin is the president and founder of the chapter of that piece, that I was talking about.

Allison could hardly stand to look at me when we were in school together, and way back in elementary school, after my mother died, she asked

to switch desks to be farther away from me, telling the teacher that I smelled like something dying.

Hanna's response comes almost immediately. 'U got it. 'C u tonight.' The text message read- saying: 'You have got it- I will see you tonight.'

I wonder what Allison would think if she knew I would have been using her as cover for my boyfriend. She would freak out for sure, and the thought makes me smile. A little before seven o'clock I come downstairs with my overnight bag slung conspicuously over my shoulder. I have even let a few of my pajamas poke out, funny I were them out like the most girl yet there off at home, I run around naked there- I have packed the whole bag exactly as- I would have if I were going to Hanna's.

When mom gives me a flitting smile and tells me to have an enjoyable time, I feel a brief pang of guilt. I lie so often and so easily now. Then it is not enough to stop me- not at all. Once outside I head toward the North End just in case Jenny or mom is watching from the windows. The walk is long, and I make it to Deering Highlands just as the last of the light is swirling out of the sky. As always, the streets here are deserted. I push through the rusted metal gate that surrounds the possessions, slide aside the loose slats covering one ground- floor window, and winch myself into the house. The darkness surprises me, and for a moment I stand there, blinking until my eyes adjust to the low light.

Part: 15

The air feels sticky and stale, and the house smells like mildew. Various forms begin to arise, and I make my way into the living room, and to the mold spotted sofa. Its springs are in trouble, and half of its stuffing has been torn out by mice, but you can tell that once it must have been pretty- elegant, even.

I fish my clock out from my bag and set the alarm for eleven-thirty. It is going to be a long night. Then I stretch out on the lumpy couch, bawling my backpack underneath my head. It is not the world's most comfortable pillow, but it will do. I close my eyes and let the sounds of the mice scrabbling, and the low groans, and the mysterious ticking of the walls lull me to sleep.

I woke up in the darkness from a nightmare about my mother. I sit up straight, and for one panicked second do not know where I am. The faulty springs squeal underneath me and then I remembered it all in the past in my mind. I fumble for my alarm clock and see that it is already 12:21- I know I should get up, but I still feel groggy from the heat and the dream, and for a few

more instants I just sit there, taking deep breaths. I am sweating; the hair is sticking to the back of my neck.

My dream was the one I usually have but this time reversed: I was floating in the deep- sea, treading water, watching my mother perched on some crumbling ledge hundreds and hundreds of feet above me- so far- I could not make out any of her features, just the blurry lines of her silhouette, framed against the sun. I was trying to call out a warning to her, trying to lift my arms, and wave at her to go back, away from the edge, but the more I struggled the more the water seemed to drag at me and hold me back, the consistency of glue, suctioning my arms in place and oozing in my throat to freeze the words there.

Besides, all the time and was drifting around me like snow, and I knew at any second, she would fall and smash her head on the jagged rocks, which poked up through the water like sharpened fingernails.

Then she was falling, flailing, a black spot growing bigger and bigger against the blazing sun, and I was trying to scream, but I could not, and as the figure grew larger, I realized it was not my mother headed for the rocks. It was

Ray...

Part: 16

That is when I woke up. I finally stood, slightly dizzy, trying to ignore a feeling of dread. I go slowly, gropingly, to the window, and am relieved once I am outside, even though I am in more danger on the streets. But at least there is a bit of a breeze. The atmosphere in the house was stifling.

Ray is already waiting for me when I arrive at Back and Gold Cove, crouching in the shadows cast by a group of trees that stand near the old parking lot. He is so perfectly concealed that I trip over him.

Part: 17

He reaches up and draws me down into a crouch. In the moonlight, his eyes seem to glow, like a cat's. He gestures silently across Back and Gold Cove, to the line of twinkling lights just before the border: the guard huts. From a distance, they look like a line of bright white lanterns strung up for a nighttime picnic- cheerful.

Twenty- one feet or more beyond the security points is the actual fence, and beyond the fence, the backwoods. They have never looked quite so strange

to me as they do now, dancing and swaying in the wind. I am glad Ray and I agreed not to express until we crossed over. The lump in my throat is making it difficult to breathe, much less say anything.

We would be crossing over at the tip of Bridge so high up in the valleys, on the northeast point of the cove: if we were swimming, a direct diagonal from our meet-up point. Ray impels my hand three times. That is our signal to move to the sounds... I follow him as we skirt the perimeter of the cove, being careful to avoid the marshland; it looks deceptively like grass, especially in the dark, but you can get sucked down almost knee-deep before you realize the difference. Ray arrows from shadow to shadow, moving noiselessly on the grass. In places- he seems to vanish completely before my eyes, to melt into the darkness.

As we loop around to the north side of the cove, the guard stations begin to outline themselves more clearly- becoming actual buildings, one-room huts made of concrete and bulletproof glass. Sweat pricks up on my palms, and the lump in my throat seems to quadruple in size until I feel like I am being strangled.

I suddenly see how stupid our plan sounds to me and them. A hundred- a thousand! Things could go wrong. The sentry guard in number twenty- two might not have had his coffee yet- or he might have had it, nonetheless, not enough to knock him out- or the Valium might not have kicked in. As well as even if he is asleep, Ray could have been wrong about the parts of the fence that are not electrified; or the city might have pumped on the power, just for the night.

I am so scared I feel like I might faint. I want to get Ray's attention and scream that we must turn around, call the whole thing off, but he is still moving swiftly up ahead of me, and screaming anything- or making any noise at all will bring the guards down on us for sure. The guards make the regulators look like little kids playing police officers and robbers.

Regulators and raiders have nightsticks and dogs; guards have rifles and tear gas.

Part: 18

We finally reached the northern arm of the cove. Ray drops down behind one of the larger trees and waits for me to catch up. I got into a crouch next to him.

This is my last opportunity to tell him I want to go back. But I cannot speak, and when I try to shake my head no, nothing happens.

I feel like I am back in my dream, getting slurped into the dark, floundering like an insect stuck in a bowl of honey.

Ray can tell how frightened I am.

He leans forward and fumbles for a moment, trying to find my ear. His mouth bumps once on my neck and grazes my cheek lightly- which despite my panic makes me shiver with pleasure- and then skims my earlobe.

'It's going to be okay,' he undertones to me, and I feel slightly better.

Nothing bad will happen when- I am with Ray.

Then we are up again.

We run off moving forward at intervals, sprinting silently from one tree to the next and then stopping while Ray listens- as well as making sure there has been no change, no shouts or sounds of approaching footsteps.

Stum- p- Stum- p- Stum- p!

The sound is getting closer to me.

Part: 19

The moments of exposure- of dashing from cover to cover- grow longer as the trees begin to thin out, and the whole time we are getting closer and closer to the line where the fringe of grass and growth disappears altogether and we will have to move out in the open, completely vulnerable.

It is only about fifty feet from the last bush to the fence, but it might as well be a lake of burning fire.

Beyond the torn-up remains of a road, that existed before Pittsburgh was enclosed is the fence itself: looming, silver, in the moonlight, like some enormous spider webs. A place where things stick, get caught, and are eaten. Ray has told me to take my time, to focus; when I pick my way over the barbed wire at the top, but I cannot help but picture myself impaled on all those sharp, spiny barbs. And then, suddenly, we are out- past the incomplete protection obtainable by the trees, moving quickly over the loose gravel and shale of the old road. He and I move ahead of me, bent double, and I stoop as low as I can, but it does not make me feel any less exposed.

Fear it screams...

Hold Me

Ray

Part: 1

Kellie- Yes it screams slams into me from all sides at once; I have never ever known anything like this fear. I am not sure whether the wind picks up at that second or whether it is just the terror cutting through me, but my whole body feels like ice hangs from the trees in her story.

Ray- The darkness comes alive on all sides of us, full of darting shadows and malicious, looming shapes, ready to turn into a guard any second, and I picture the silence suddenly punctuated by screams, sighs, horns, bullets. I picture blooming pain and bright lights.

The world seems to transform into a series of disconnected images: a bright white circle of light surrounding guard hut twenty- two, which expands ever outward, as though hungry, and ready to swallow us; inside, a guard slumped backward in his chair, mouth open, sleeping...

Kellie- Ray turning to me, smiling- is it possible he is smiling? Stones dancing underneath my feet like at prom night in his arms. Everything feels far away, as unreal and flimsy as a shadow cast by a flame. Even if I do not feel real, I cannot feel myself breathing or moving, though I must be doing both.

As well as then just like that, we are at the fence. Ray springs jump into the air, and for a second, he pauses there. I want to scream Stop! Stop! And halt!

Part: 2

Ray- I picture the crack and sizzle as her body connects with fifty thousand volts of electricity, but then she lands on the fence, and the fence sways silently: dead and cold, just like he said.

Kellie- I should be climbing up after him, but I cannot. Not immediately. A feeling of wonder creeps over me, slowly pushing out the fear. I have been so terrified of this and things like this... of the border fence since- I was a baby.

I have never gotten within five feet of the fence now. Do you see it...? We have been warned not to, had it drilled into us. They told us we would fry; told us it would make our hearts go haywire, kill us instantly. Now I reach out

and place my hand through the chain-link, run my fingers over it. Dead and cold and harmless I am like her or so I see Jenny, as I angel looking at me saying to do this all she is dark and looking at me with evil eyes, the same fence the city uses for playgrounds and schoolyards. In that second it hits me how deep and complex the lies are, how they run through Pittsburgh like sewers, backing up into everything, filling the city with stench: the whole city built and constructed within a perimeter of lies. Ray is a fast climber; he has made it halfway up the fence.

He looks over his shoulder and sees that I am still standing there like an idiot, not moving. He jerks his head at me like, what are you doing?

I put my hand out to the fence again and then immediately jerk it back again: A shock runs through me all at once, but it has nothing to do with the voltage that should be pumping there. Something has just occurred to me.

They have lied about everything- about the fence, and the existence of the- Invalids, about a million other things besides. They told us the raids were carried out for our protection.

They told us the watchdogs were only interested in keeping the peace. They told us that love was a disease. They told us it would kill us in the end. For the very first time, I realized that this, too, might be a lie.

There was mess and stink and blood and the smell of skin burning. There were people: people standing and eating, talking on the phone, frying eggs, or singing in the shower.

I am overwhelmed with sadness for everything that was lost and filled with anger toward the people who took it away. My people- or at least, my old people.

‘What?’ I ask. The intensity of his gaze nearly knocks the breath out of me - as though he is staring straight at me.

He does not answer me directly. He flips forward a few pages in the book, but he does not glance down at it. He keeps his eyes on me the whole time.

‘You want to hear a different one?’ He does not wait for me to answer before beginning to recite, ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.’

There is that word again: love. My heart stops when he says it, then stutters into a frantic rhythm.

“I love thee to the depth, breadth, and height my soul can reach.’ I know he is only speaking someone else’s words, but they seem to come from him anyway. His eyes are dancing with light; in each of them, I see a bright point of candlelight reflected.

He takes a step forward and kisses my forehead softly. “I love thee to the level of every day’s most quiet need.’ It feels as though the floor is swinging - like I am falling.

‘Alex-’ I start to say, but the word gets tangled in my throat. He kisses each cheekbone- a delicious, skimming kiss, barely grazing my skin. “I love thee freely.” ‘Ray,’ I say, a little louder. My heart is beating so fast I am afraid it will burst from my ribs. He pulls back and gives me a small, crooked smile.

Browning,’ he says, then traces a finger over the bridge of my nose. ‘You don’t like it-’

The way he says it, so low and serious, still staring into my eyes, makes me feel as though he is asking something else.

‘No. I mean, yes. I mean, I do, but -’ The truth is, I am not sure what I mean. I cannot think or speak clearly. A single word is swirling around inside me- a storm, a hurricane- and I must squeeze my lips together to keep it from swelling up to my tongue and fighting its way out into the open. Love, love, love, love. A word I have never pronounced, not to anyone, a word I have never even really let myself think.

‘You don’t have to explain.’ He takes another step backward. Again- I have the sense, confusedly, that we are talking about something else.

I have disappointed him somehow.

Whatever has just passed between us- and something did, even if I am not sure what or how or why- has made him sad.

I can see it in his eyes, even though he is still smiling, and it makes me want to apologize, or throw my arms around him and ask him to kiss me. But I am still afraid to open my mouth- afraid that the word will come shooting out, and terrified about what comes afterward. ‘Come here.’ Ray sets the book down and offers me his hand. ‘I want to show you something.’

He leads me over to the bed, and again a wave of shyness overtakes me. I am not sure what he expects, and when he sits down, I hang back, feeling self-conscious.

‘It’s okay, Hanna,’ he says. As always, hearing him say my name relaxes me. He scoots backward on the bed and lies down on his back, and I do the same, so we are lying side by side. The bed is narrow. There’s just enough room for the two of us.

‘See?’ he says, tilting his chin upward.

Above our heads, the star’s flare, glitter, and flash: thousands and thousands of them, so many thousands they look like snowflakes whirling away into the inky dark. I cannot help it; I gasp.

Part: 3

I do not think I have ever seen so many stars in my life. The sky looks so closely- strung so taut above our heads, beyond the roofless trailer- it feels as though we are falling into it, as though we could jump off the bed and the sky would catch us, hold us, bounce us like a trampoline.

‘What do you think?’ He asks.

‘I love it.’ The word pops out, and instantly the weight on my chest dissipates. ‘I love it,’ I say again, testing it. An easy word to say, once you say it. Short. To the point. Rolls off the tongue. Amazingly, I have never said it before.

I can tell Ray is pleased. The smile in his voice grows bigger. ‘The no plumbing thing is kind of a bummer,’ he says. ‘But you have to admit the view is killer.’

‘I wish we could stay here,’ I blurt out, and then quickly stutter, ‘I mean, not really.

Not for good, but - you know what I mean.’

He moves his arm under my neck, so I inch over and lay my head in the spot where his shoulder meets his chest, where it fits perfectly. ‘I’m glad you got to see it,’ he says. For a while, we just lay there in silence. His chest rises and falls with his breathing, and after a while, the motion starts to lull me to sleep.

My limbs feel impossibly heavy, and the stars are rearranging themselves into words. I want to keep looking, to read out their meaning, but my lids are heavy too: impossible, impossible to keep my eyes open.

‘Ray?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Tell me that poem again.’ My voice does not sound like my own; my words seem to come from a distance.

‘Which one?’ He whispers.

‘The one you know by heart.’ Drifting: I am drifting.

‘I know a lot of them by heart.’

‘Anyone, then.’ He takes a deep breath and begins: ‘I carry your heart with me. I carry it in my heart. I am never without it.’ He speaks on, words washing over me, the way that sunlight skips over the surface of water and filters into the depths below, lighting up the darkness. I keep my eyes closed. Amazingly, I can still see the stars: whole galaxies blooming from nothing- pink and purple suns, vast silver oceans, a thousand white moons.

It seems like I have only been asleep five minutes when he is gently shaking me awake. The sky is still inky black, the moon high and bright, but I can tell the candles are pooling around us that I must have been out for at least an hour or so.

‘Time to go,’ he says, brushing the hair off my forehead.

‘What time is it?’ My voice is thick with sleep.

‘A little before three.’ Alex sits up and scoots off the bed, then reaches out a hand and pulls me to my feet. ‘We’ve got to cross before Sleeping Beauty wakes up.’ ‘Sleeping Beauty?’ I shake my head confusedly.

Part: 4

Ray laughs softly. ‘After poetry,’ he says, leaning down to kiss me, ‘we move on to fairy tales.’

Then it is back through the woods; down the broken path that leads past the bombed-out houses; through the woods again. The whole time I felt as though I had not woken up. I am not even scared or nervous when we climb the fence. Getting over the barbed wire is infinitely easier the second time around, and as though the shadows as though the shadows have texture and shield us like a cloak. The guard at hut number twenty- one is still in the same position- head tilted back, feet on his desk, mouth open- and soon we are weaving our way around the cove.

Then we are slipping silently through the streets toward Highlands, and it is then I have the strangest thought, half dread, and half wish: that all of this is

a dream, and when I wake up, I will find myself in the Boondocks. I will wake up and find I have always been there, and that all of Pittsburgh- and the workshops, and the curfew, and the procedure- was some long, twisted nightmare. I only spent a few hours there and I miss the Wastelands already- the wind through the trees that sound just like the ocean, the incredible smells of blooming plants, the invisible scurrying things- all that life, pushing and extending in every direction, on and on and on.

No walls-

Part: 5

Then Ray is leading me to the sofa and shaking out a blanket over me, kissing me, and wishing me a good night. He has the morning shift at the labs and has just barely enough time to go home, shower, and make it work on time. I hear his footsteps melting away into the darkness.

Then I sleep. Love: a single word, a wispy thing, a word no bigger or longer than an edge.

That is what it is: an edge; a razor. It draws up through the center of your life, cutting everything in two. Before and after.

The rest of the world falls away on either side. Before and after- and during, a moment no bigger or longer than an edge.

‘Live free or die,’ I say- as she did. One of the strangest things about life is that it will chug on, blind and oblivious, even as your private world- you are little carved- out sphere- is twisting and morphing, even breaking apart. One day you have parents: the next day you are an orphan. One day you have a place and a path. The next day you are lost in a wilderness.

And still, the sun rises, and clouds mass and drift, and people shop for groceries and toilets flush, and blinds go up and down. That is when you realize that most of its- life, the relentless mechanism of existing- is not about you. It does not include you at all. It will thrust onward even after you have jumped the edge.

Even after you are dead.

When I make my way back into downtown Pittsburgh in the morning, that is what surprises me the most- how normal everything looks. I do not know what I was expecting.

I did not think that buildings would have tumbled down overnight, that the streets would have melted into rubble, but it is still a shock to see a stream of people carrying briefcases, and shop owners unlocking their front doors, and a single car trying to push through a crowded street. It seems absurd that they do not know, have not felt any change or tremor, even as my life has been completely turned upside down. As I head home, I keep feeling paranoid, like someone will be able to smell the Wilds on me, will be able to tell just from seeing my face that I have crossed over.

The back of my neck itches as though it is being poked with branches, and I keep whipping off my backpack to make sure there are not any leaves or burrs clinging to it- not that it matters since it is not like Pittsburgh is treeless.

Nonetheless, no one even glances in my direction. It is a little before nine o'clock, and most people are rushing to get to work on time. An endless blur of normal people doing normal things, eyes straight ahead of them, paying no attention to the short, nondescript girl with a lumpy backpack pushing past them.

The short, nondescript girl with a secret burning inside of her like a fire.

It is as though my night in the Wilds has sharpened my vision around the edges. Even though everything looks superficially the same, it seems somehow different- flimsy, as though you could put your hand through the buildings and sky and even the people. I remember being incredibly young and watching Rachel build a sandcastle at the beach. She must have worked on it for hours, using different cups and containers to shape towers and turrets. When it was done it looked perfect, like it could have been made from stone.

But when the tide came in, it did not take more than two or three waves to dissolve its shape entirely. I remember I burst into tears, and my mother bought me an ice cream cone and made me share it with Rachel.

That is what Pittsburgh looks like this morning: like something in danger of dissolving. I keep thinking about what Ray always says: There are more of us than you think.

I sneak a glance at everyone who goes by, thinking I will be able to read some secret sign on their faces, some mark of resistance, but everyone looks the same as always: harried, hurried, annoyed, zoned out. When I get home, mom is in the kitchen washing dishes. I tried to scoot past her, but she called

out to me. I pause with one foot on the stairs. She comes into the hallway, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

‘How was Hanna’s?’ she asks. She flicks her eyes all over my face, searchingly, as though checking for signs of something. I will try to get back another bout of paranoia. She could not know where I had been.

‘It was fine,’ I say, shrugging, trying to sound casual. ‘Didn’t get a lot of sleep, though.’

‘Mmm.’ Carol keeps looking at me intensely. ‘What did you girls do together?’

She never asks about Hana’s house and has not for years. Something is wrong, I think.

‘You know, the usual. I watched some TV. Hana gets, like, seven channels.’ I cannot tell if my voice sounds weird and high-pitched, or if I am just imagining it.

Carol looks away, twisting her mouth up like she has accidentally gotten a mouthful of sour milk. I can tell she is trying to work out a way to say something unpleasant; she gets her sour milk face whenever she must give out sad news. She knows about Ray, she knows, she knows. The walls press closer, and the heat is stifling.

Then, to my surprise, she curls her mouth into a smile, reaches out, and places a hand on my arm. ‘You know, Lena - it won’t be like this for very much longer.’ I have avoided thinking about the procedure for twenty-four hours, but now that awful, looming number pops back into my head, throwing a shadow over everything.

Seventeen days.

‘I know,’ I squeeze out. Now my voice sounds weird. Carol nods and keeps the strange half-smile plastered on her face. ‘I know it’s hard to believe, but you won’t miss her once it’s over.’

‘I know.’ Like there is a dying frog caught in my throat.

Carol keeps nodding at me vigorously. It looks as though her head is connected to a yo-yo. I get the feeling she wants to say something more, something that will reassure me, but she obviously cannot think of anything because we just stand there, frozen like that, for a minute.

Part: 6

Finally- I say, 'I am going upstairs. Shower.' It takes all my willpower just to get out the words. Seventeen days keep tearing through my mind, like an alarm.

Mom seems relieved that I have broken the silence. 'Okay,' she says. 'Okay...' I start up the stairs two at a time. I cannot wait to lock myself in the bathroom. Even though it must be more than eighty degrees in the house, I want to stand under a stream of beating hot water, melt myself into vapor.

'Oh, Liv.' Mom calls out to me as an afterthought. I turn around and she is not looking at me. She is inspecting the fraying border of one of her dish towels. 'You should put on something nice. A dress- or those white slacks you got last year. And do your hair. Do not just leave it to air- dry.'

'Why?' I do not like the way she will not look at me, especially since her mouth is going all screwy again. Hanna snaps her head up and looks at me. 'Not alone,' she says quickly. 'Of course, not alone. Her mother will be coming with us. And I will be here too. Besides, she had her procedure last month.' As though that is what is bothering me.

'Today?' I must reach out and place one hand on the wall. Somehow, I have managed to completely forget about her some that neat, printed name on a page.

Hanna must think I am nervous about meeting him because she smiles at me.

'Do not worry, Liv. You will be fine. We will do most of the talking. I just thought you two should meet, since -' She does not finish her sentence. She does not have to.

Since we are paired. Since we will be married.

Part: 7

Bedtime oh bedtime-

Since I will share my bed with him and wake up every day of my life next to him and must let him put his hands on me and must sit across from him at dinner eating canned asparagus and listening to him rattle on about plumbing or carpentry or whatever it is he is going to get assigned to do.

'No!' I burst out.

Kellie- I look startled or so you would say. She is not used to hearing that word, certainly not from me.

‘What do you mean, no?’

I lick my lips. I know refusing her is dangerous, and I know that it is wrong.

But I cannot meet her soon enough. I will not. I will not sit there and pretend to like him or listen to mom talk about where we will live in a few years, while Ray is out there somewhere- waiting for me to meet up with him or tapping his fingers against his desk while he listens to music, or breathing, or doing anything at all. ‘I mean -’ I struggle for an excuse.

‘I mean- I mean, couldn’t we do it some other time? I do not feel good.’ This, at least, is true.

‘Oh,’ I say. The way I figure it, life’s the total of all our small mistakes, little tragedies, bad choices. Parents teach you a lot of things, but the most important thing they teach you is this: how people will freak you up in the future. If they are any good, they teach you to get used to it.

Like the party’s before- I have not been upstairs since the first time Ray brought me here with Hanna when we made it a point to explore every room of the house. I did not even think to check the second floor earlier this afternoon. Here it is even darker than downstairs, if possible, and hotter too, a black and drifting mist.

He starts shuffling down the hall, past a row of identical wooden doors.

‘This way...’ Above us, a frantic sound of fluttering: bards, disturbed by the sound of his voice. He stops at the door to the master bedroom. I shivered. But Ray is emphatic, so I let him open the door and I passed inside in front of him. As soon as we walked into the room I gasped and stopped so suddenly he bumped into me. The room is incredible; it has transformed me into a romantic thought. I was his wife now... a happy ever after no yet that’s- a life, no?

‘Well?’ There is a note of anxiety in-

His voice... ‘What do you think of this?’ I cannot answer him immediately.

He shoved the old bed when he jumped in naked, into one of the corners, and swept me off my feet, the floor perfectly clean. The windows- or

what windows remain are flung open, so the air smells like gardenias and night-blooming jasmine, their scents drifting in on the wind from outside. He has arranged our blanket and books in the center of the room and unraveled a sleeping bag there too, surrounding the whole area with dozens and dozens of candles stuck in funny makeshift canisters, like old cups and mugs or discarded Coca-Cola cans, just like they were at his house in the woods. He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

‘Ray-’ I start to say, Suddenly I am almost frightened of him, terrified of his absolute and utter perfection. He leans forward and kisses me. And when he is pressed so close to me, with the softness of his T-shirt brushing my face and the smell of suntan lotion and grass coming off his skin, he feels less frightening.

‘It’s too dangerous to go back to the Wilds.’ His voice is hoarse, as though he has been yelling for an exceptionally long time, and a muscle is working furiously in his jaw. ‘So, I brought the Wilds here. I thought you would like it.’

‘I do. I- I love it.’ I press my hands against my chest, wishing I could somehow be even closer to him. I hate skin; I hate bones and bodies. I want to curl up inside of him and be carried there forever. His face so quickly I can barely catch them all, and his jaw keeps twitching back and forth. ‘I know we do not have much time like you said. We hardly have any time at all-’

‘No!’ I bury my face in his chest, wrap my arms around him and squeeze.

Unimaginable, incomprehensible: a life lived without him. The idea breaks me- the fact that he is almost crying breaks me- the fact that he did this for me, the fact that he believes I am worth it- kills me. He is my world and my world- is him, and without him, there is no world.

‘I will not do it. I will not go through with it. I cannot. I want to be with you. I need to be with you.’

He grasps my face, bends down to look into my eyes. His face is blazing now, full of hope.

‘You don’t have to go through with it...’ he says.

His words come tumbling out.

He has been thinking about this for a long time and only trying not to say it. ‘Liv, you do not have to do anything. We could run away together. To the

backwoods. Just go and never come back. Only- Liv, we could not ever come back.

You know that, right? They would kill us both or lock us up forever- a lifetime of running: that is what I have just said I wanted. I take a quick step backward, feeling suddenly dizzy.

‘Wait,’ I say. ‘Just hold on a second.’

He releases me. The hope dies in his face all at once, and for a moment we just stand there, looking at each other.

‘You weren’t serious,’ he says finally.

‘You didn’t mean it.’

‘No, I did mean it, it’s just-’

‘It’s just that you’re scared,’ he says.

He walks to the window and stares out at the night, refusing to look at me.

His back is terrifying again: so solid and impenetrable, a wall.

‘I am not scared. I am just-’ I fight a murky feeling. I do not know what I am. I want Ray and I want my old life and I want peace and happiness and I know that I cannot live without him, all at the same time.

‘It’s okay...’ His voice is dull. ‘You don’t have to explain.’

‘My mother,’ I burst out. He turns then, looking startled. I am as surprised as he is. I did not even know I was going to say the words until I said them. ‘I do not want to be like her. Don’t you understand? It is me or her take your pick and he said the words...

I will...

Chapter: 14

Retrograde...

‘He is,’ he says, and makes an abrupt right turn down a short hallway that ends at a heavy iron door. This is marked with another printed sign. It says, LIFERS. Underneath the word, someone has written in pen, HA-HA.

‘What are you-’ I am more confused than ever, but I do not have time to finish formulating my question. Alex pushes his way out the door and the smell that greets us- of wind and grass and fresh things- is so unexpected and welcoming that I stop speaking, taking long, grateful gulps of air. Without realizing it, I have been breathing through my mouth. Do you feel like you are falling? You have taken this step-in front of you is further from the truth. You fall apart in front of me again, again! Yes- denial is not the way to forgiveness.

We are in a tiny courtyard, surrounded by the stained gray sides of the Vaults. The grass here is amazingly lush, reaching to my knees. A single tree twists upward to our left, and a bird is twittering in its branches. It is surprisingly nice out here, peaceful, and pretty- strange to be standing in the middle of a little garden while enclosed by the massive stone walls of the prison, like being at the exact center of a hurricane, and finding peace and silence in the middle of so much shrieking damage.

He has moved several places away. He is standing, head bowed, with his eyes on the ground. He must have a sense too of the peacefulness here, the stillness that seems to hang in the air like a veil, covering everything in softness and rest. The sky above us is darker than it was when we first entered the vaults: Against all the grayness and shadow, the grass stands vivid and electric, as though it is lit up from inside. It will rain at any second. It must. I have the sensation of the world holding its breath before a giant exhale, balancing, teetering, about to let go.

‘Here.’ His voice rings out, surprisingly loud, and it startles me.

‘Right here.’ He points to a shard of rock sticking up crookedly from the ground. ‘That’s where my father is.’ The grass is broken up by dozens of these rocks, which was naturally, haphazardly Then I realize that they have been deliberately tamped down into the earth. Some of them are covered in fading black markings, mostly illegible, although on one stone I recognize the word BLAIR and on another DIED.

Tombstones, I realize, as the purpose of the courtyard dawns on me. We are standing in the middle of a graveyard. Alex is staring down at a large chunk of concrete, as flat as a tablet, pressed down into the earth in front of his feet. All the writing is visible here, the words neatly printed in what looks like a black marker, their edges slightly blurred as though someone has been continuously retracing them over an extended period. I look at her grave- I want to reach out and slip my hand into Ray’s, but I do not think we are safe.

A few windows are surrounding the courtyard on the ground floor, and even though they are thickly coated in grime, someone could walk by at any moment, lookout, and see us. 'Your friends, and sister?'

He nods, then shakes his shoulders, a sudden movement as though trying to jerk himself away from sleep. 'Yeah.'

'He was here?'

One side of his mouth quirks up into a smile, but the rest of his face remains stony. 'For four years I have looked over these.' He draws a slow circle in the dirt with his toe, the first physical sign of discomfort or distraction he has given since we arrived. At that moment I am in awe of him: Since I have known him, he has done nothing but support me and give me comfort and listen to me, and all this time he has been carrying the weight of his secrets too.

Part: 8

I say to you now dad- 'What happened?'

I ask quietly. 'I mean, what did he...?' I trail off. I do not want to push the issue. It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, what a child will believe You never loved me, It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe, You never loved me, You can't hurt me now, I got away from you, I never thought I would, you can't make me cry, you once had the power, I never felt so good about myself, seems like yesterday, I lay down next to your boots and I prayed for your anger to end, Oh Father I have sinned; Oh Father you never wanted to live that way you never wanted to hurt me, why am I running away, maybe someday, when I look back I'll be able to say you didn't mean to be cruel Somebody hurt you too.

~*~

Ray glances at me quickly and looks away. 'What did he do?' he says. The hardness has returned to his voice. 'I do not know. What all the people who end up see us here in this town. He thought to himself. He avoids my eyes carefully. 'The dead ward,' he says quietly. 'For political prisoners, mostly. They are kept in solitary confinement. And no one ever gets released.' He gestures around him, to the other shards of stone poking up through the grass, dozens of makeshift graves. I would give anything to touch him, but the best I can do is an inch closer to him so that our skin is separated by only a few inches.

He looks at me then, shooting me a sad smile. showing off those awful teeth, but his eyes maintain their strange flatness, as though there is a curtain drawn over them. I wonder if this, for him, was a side effect of the cure, or whether he was always like that.

He tilts his head back, peering at Ray through narrowed eyes, grows even stronger. I remember those nights...

Kelly- Why?

Why- she and they ended it the way I did- so- that way everyone, even he would be able to see me, with their own eyes. So, they can see the wounds that they did to me. Realizing all the gashes, which they gave me over time, and the ones I give myself because of them. They all can look at me, and see it all... Just like, I see it every day when I look at my own reflection! They all can think- about what they have done to me. However, I do not think they would care. If they did see me hanging there bare, lifeless, and limp.

They have no emotions for me in their pee- brained minds, to feel anything. I ask- can you grasp me; can you feel me? Can you get the impression of me hanging there- all by myself? I am so lonesome and afraid! You know- I do feel as if I would be better off being dead! Don't you think so too? How did I let things get so out of hand? Or did I? Is this all meant to be?

Really...?

I just do not know what to believe anymore. I sang throw the air and jumped. I did it! But not like I planned. One way or another that made me come to my senses. I got lost from the noose, on my tree swing, and fell hard to the ground below. That is when I walked into the house, with my head down. And went up the steps up to my room dripping wet. The books are all I have now with the stone that says their name, along with their faces looking back at me when I am not looking to see them there.

Just like her, I answer myself- 'I know that there is not one person on this planet who genuinely cares if I am even here or not.' Oh God- 'Why does my life have to be like this?' I do not think I can take any more of living in this town!

The PEOPLE, SCHOOL, EVERYONE, and EVERYTHING is so freaking FAKE! It is all just another way for SOCIETY to make me feel inferior. Because they think they are so SUPERIOR to me, and who I am to them. Every day of my life, I have felt like I have been drowning in a pool, with weights attached to my ankles.

I say, Maggie- Of course, there is no way for me to escape from the chains that are holding her him, and me down. The one and only person that holds the key to my freedom: I WILL NEVER LET ME GO! I have lived in this small dull town for too damn long. It is an UNSYMPATHETIC, obscure, lonely, depressed, and depressing place. All these streets surrounding me are covered with filth.

I respect myself more than that, but it is getting harder to regardless. If that is what it takes to be popular, I do not want it. These types of guys just are not worthy of me I suppose. The other girls can have them all they want, and you know they do. Then lastly, nerds a sad and pathetic grope of creatures that are so misunderstood.

Really through no fault of their own. Most of the time, it is just the way they all are, and not what they choose to be. Just like most of us out there. You know I am not even on that list either. As for me- and my category, I would have to say that I am in the 'Rejected classification.' or 'Reject!' However- I do not want anybody's pity. I just want their RESPECT! That is just something I cannot have been in this unwanted grouping. Being in this rejected category is not always pleasant as you can see. I have learned to adapt and overcome life's many difficulties up to now at least.

I have learned that some people can do harmful and heinous things to others, yet they prosper. Then someone like me must SUFFER through it all. It eats at you over time: 'People are fake anger and frustration will eat at you like cancer.' Until it kills you! When I look back at everything in my past, the whole photograph comes into focus. 'Revenge is not the answer, everyone gets a turn.' It is just a matter of time, what is coming around for you, will you be like my friends and family, or like me or her or him?

What do you choose to be?

~Nevaeh~